

クロスカディア ②

影メグル地ノ邂逅者たち

神坂 一



富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト 谷口ヨシタカ

Crosscadia Vol.2

Encounters In The Land Where Shadows Roam

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The moon circling this land, Crosscadia. A mystic light shining in the void.

Every time she sees it, Laphra Lifra remembers. The dream she'd held since childhood.
The wish that was once almost within her grasp.

And the moment it was crushed.

That day.

Before the crackling campfire, Elder Nenes Totol spoke solemnly.

—The path has frozen. Laphra Lifra, your Rite can no longer be performed—

For a moment, she didn't understand the meaning of the words. When she realized it meant the end of her dream, even the roaring fire before her eyes lost its color.

As Laphra Lifra grew faint with despair, Nenes Totol continued.

—But listen, Laphra Lifra. Fate is not closed to you. Journey to the southern continent of the Humes; listen to the wind and catch the scent. If you do, perhaps the time will come when the ice melts—

Supported by those words, Laphra Lifra kept running across the earth.

How much time had passed since then? The moon had circled the world many times.

Now.

Above Laphra Lifra's head, five moons shone high in the void.

And below her eyes lay the lights born of a city of "People."

Ooooooooooh—!

The girl howled toward the heavens, her body trembling with joy.

Then, Laphra Lifra sprinted through the moonlit night.

On stormy nights like this, the old man always remembered.

The stories he heard as a child. That war fifty years ago.

—On stormy nights, the devil comes—

A silly fairy tale he heard from his grandmother when he was small.

But then he became a young man and was drafted into that war—and again, on a

stormy night.

There was a battle.

No. Could one even call that a battle?

Amidst fierce wind and rain, the bugle sounding the enemy attack rang out.

Soldiers scrambled out of the barracks into the storm, scattered and confused—

Screams mingled with the wind and the rain.

Was that flash of light a bolt of lightning? Or an attack launched by someone?

He couldn't even comprehend what was happening.

Eventually, dawn broke, and after the storm had passed.

What remained were a few comrades and a vast number of corpses of those who *used* to be comrades.

—It was only much later that he learned the devastation was brought about by a single "enemy" who had been separated from their unit by the storm.

The old man had not seen that "enemy" directly.

However, the image overlapped with the devil from the stories he heard as a child, becoming etched into his heart.

Since then—

Every time a stormy night came, he remembered that night. He fantasized. He wondered if the devil that had stepped out of the storybook would appear before him.

After the war, he amassed a small fortune and established a mansion on the edge of town. Even now, having reached this age through quiet years, that had not changed.

It wasn't quite a palatial estate, but it was a manor far too large to be called just a "house."

He hadn't thought so when he was younger, but as he aged and his children left the nest, this place—occupied only by himself and his servants—felt needlessly vast.

A fire burned in the living room hearth, and the lights on the ceiling were lit.

But the wind and rain rattling the windows agitated the old man's heart, bringing the anxiety that sat like sediment at the bottom of his soul to the surface.

The dark omen, stronger than usual, wasn't just because of memories from long ago.

A while back, there was a major incident in this city.

The perpetrators were the same kind of people as the "enemy" who had driven the old man's unit to near-annihilation in the war of the past.

He heard that several members of the city guard had lost their lives in the incident.

That event, coupled with his loathsome memories, made the old man's heart stir more than usual.

He took the call bell on the side table and rang it lightly with his fingertips.

A clear metallic chime pierced through the sound of the storm.

He would have the servant waiting in the other room bring some wine. He might even have them indulge an old man's reminiscence to distract from the loneliness.

He waited a moment—

But the servant did not appear.

Did they not hear?

Thinking this, the old man rang the bell again and waited further—

Thunder flashed outside the window.

The servant did not come.

The servant was still young, but well-trained. Normally—even in a storm—they would hear the bell and always arrive immediately.

But today—

“—Iris!”

The old man called the servant's name.

“Iriiiiiis!”

There was no answer.

What was wrong? Were they being unusually lazy, or had they fallen into a deep sleep from exhaustion? Or had something happened?

The old man stood up from his armchair and walked to the door. He placed his hand on the double doors and pushed them open.

Lightning flashed outside the window.

For a split second, the light illuminated the thing beyond the doors.

A shape like a person—yet not human.

As if the anxiety he'd held since childhood, the fantasy, had caught up to him and become reality.

The old man remembered a conversation with his grandmother when he was a boy.

—*Why do devils come on stormy nights?*—

When asked, his grandmother had answered:

—*Because in the middle of a storm, no one can hear the screams for help.*—

Thunder roared.

That day, too, Shin was in a bad mood.

He didn't like being teased by everyone because of a stupid rumor spread by a jokester classmate at the training school, and the strategy theory test waiting for him in the afternoon was another reason.

But what he hated most of all was—

Knowing he should be reading his textbook while he had the chance, yet finding himself engrossed in idle chatter with the very jokester who started the rumor.

"Man, tests are such a pain," that jokester—Mark—muttered, looking out at the schoolyard from the second-floor classroom window.

The morning light through the window made his honey-colored hair shine, but his eyes were dark with gloom, likely due to the upcoming test.

"Tell me about it. What's the point of memorizing 'textbook strategy' just to get marked wrong if you don't answer exactly like the book?" Shin spat out, leaning against the window frame next to Mark, also staring outside.

Outside was the morning schoolyard. He saw students in drab, monotone uniforms arriving for school.

It was a typical scene, not exactly what one would call colorful.

...Well, both Mark and Shin were wearing the same uniform.

Shin had black hair and was tall. He had sharp features, but because his eyes were a bit intense, he was often feared or picked on for no reason when he had a grumpy face like this.

Of course, everyone here was a close acquaintance. No one would react to him over something like that.

"—It's not something you should hate so much," said a third voice from right behind them, belonging to the person sitting on a desk.

Turning around in surprise, they saw a transfer student with golden hair and eyes.

At first, he had an unapproachable air, but lately, he had been treated as just a normal friend.

The reason they were surprised wasn't because he suddenly spoke up.

They knew he was there. It was just that his relaxed attitude toward the test was unexpected.

"Wait, does that mean you're good at strategy theory, Rezelde?! Could it be?!"

To Shin's surprised question, the transfer student—Rezelde—gave a sage-like smile and said, "Not at all."

"Hold on," Shin and Mark deadpanned in unison.

Rezelde brushed his hair back with his fingertips.

"After all, strategy theory in my homeland is completely different from here. On the last test, I answered that a flight squad would settle the matter, and I was lectured that 'humans cannot fly.'"

"...I see..." Mark muttered, staring blankly.

Rezelde was an international student from another country. Many things were different for him.

"You're pretty calm for someone in that boat," Shin pressed.

Rezelde replied in a steady tone, "It is a fact that panicking won't help. An exam is like death; it will surely come for you."

"Comparing it to death, though?"

"Whatever. You obviously hate it too," Mark said with a wry smile. "But hey, there's always a chance an incident happens and it gets canceled. Man... I wish another Deva

would show up."

"Hey."

This time, Shin and Rezelde both snapped at him.

Deva—that was what they called the being that had caused a commotion in this city about a month ago.

Many people died, many were injured—and Shin and Rezelde had also been caught up in that incident, suffering damage to various degrees.

In any case, that joke wasn't funny.

Hearing that, Mark quickly waved his hands. "I-it was a joke! Don't look at me with those scary faces. Look, I was just poetically expressing that it's wrong to evaluate human worth so easily through something like a test. My bad."

"The poetry here is quite unique," Rezelde murmured, though it was unclear if he was being serious or sarcastic.

Mark turned his gaze back out the window. "Well, okay, 'Deva' was an exaggeration. But surely it's possible for something unusual to happen and the test to be canceled, right?"

"I mean, I guess it's possible..."

Shin's sentence was cut short by a black shadow appearing in front of the school gate.

A black-painted *majic-car*. While seeing majic-cars in the city wasn't rare lately, they still weren't something commoners could easily afford.

The sight of an expensive-looking black majic-car entering the schoolyard, parting the students on their way to class while the golden "curse-rings" engraved on its hood shimmered in the morning sun, was an "incident" in itself.

The car eventually came to a slow stop in front of the school building.

From Shin and his friends' second-floor classroom, they were looking almost directly down at it.

When the door opened, the driver stepped out first. The black-haired driver, wearing a navy-blue uniform-like suit and white gloves—was a woman.

Shin had seen majic-cars often enough, but this was the first time he'd seen a female driver.

Next to step out from the door opened by the driver was an old man in a black suit.

From where Shin and the others were, it was obvious his silver hair was starting to thin.

And the third person was a young man with brown hair.

He was wearing the same training school uniform as Shin and the others.

Mark muttered under his breath.

"...A transfer student? ...Well, that's not gonna get the test canceled..."

Suddenly.

As if called by something, the three of them looked up toward the window all at once.

Their eyes met.

Laphra Lifra knew.

She knew that her current actions were not exactly praiseworthy.

But—to survive, sometimes such things are necessary.

Is now that time? —Yes.

Then, should she fight? —Yes.

Laphra Lifra had come to this land far from her home to find her destiny. She could not afford to fall in a place like this.

She poured strength into her gaze.

In the eyes of the opponent glaring back at her was the light of hostility.

The thing she had to obtain was at their feet.

The two of them slowly measured each other's distance and breathing.

"Oh?"

A girl spoke up and stopped walking.

As she tilted her head slightly, the red hair ornaments on her head bobbed.

She looked to be about thirteen or fourteen. Her short, red hair suited her perfectly.

It was on her way back from grocery shopping. She was just reaching the point where her home would soon come into view.

"Home"—though to be precise, it was the place where she was squatting.

She had no memories from more than two months ago.

Well, for some reason, she didn't seem to care much about that herself.

Perhaps because of the awkward time of day, the residential area was empty of people.

—*Stray dogs often come around looking for food scraps*—

She suddenly remembered her roommate saying those words.

On the manicured lawn of a house just ahead.

There, a stray dog and a woman were glaring at each other.

The stray dog had dark brown fur. It wasn't quite a large dog, but it had a sturdy build. It was thin, but its muscles hadn't wasted away.

The opposing woman was probably seventeen or eighteen.

Her slender frame was wrapped in loose-fitting clothes embroidered with some kind of pattern, and colorful ribbon-like things were wound around various parts of her body.

Her long golden hair was gathered into a single thick braid behind her, also tied with various intertwined ribbons.

At the stray dog's feet was a bird leg with meat still on it. Probably that house's food scraps.

The girl understood. The dog and the woman were fighting over that meat.

Of course, a normal person wouldn't understand it that way, but anyway, she understood.

"The law of the jungle?" the girl muttered involuntarily.

The woman was the one who reacted.

Apparently, she hadn't noticed the girl's presence and turned toward her with a look of surprise.

The dog didn't miss that chance.

It whirled around, snatched the bird meat in its mouth, and bolted with the speed of lightning!

"Ah!"

By the time the woman realized and let out a cry of regret, it was too late. The dog had run off into the bushes with the meat.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Crying out in despair, the woman slumped to her knees.

"...Um... did I get in the way?" the girl muttered awkwardly.

But the woman didn't answer. Was it out of humiliation? Or regret? She pressed both hands to the earth and wept.

"...E-er..."

The girl was bewildered—and then she suddenly remembered.

The bread inside the grocery bag she was carrying.

Her roommate had told her not to feed animals for no reason... but in this case, would the opponent be considered an animal?

"Well, whatever."

Deciding not to worry about various things, the girl took a piece of bread out of the paper bag—thought for a moment, tore it in half, and held out one piece to the woman.

"Want some?"

The woman snapped her head up.

Laphra Lifra was defeated.

The sustenance to link her life to tomorrow. She had been defeated in the struggle for it.

Someone had spoken from the side, and her attention was diverted for a split second—that opening was exploited.

Of course, she had no intention of blaming her defeat on others. Her pride would not allow such weak-willed folly. Her defeat was entirely due to her own immaturity.

This was the result after resorting to the act of raiding another's territory.

What remained was only despair.

What reached the ears of Laphra Lifra as she lay prostrate on the ground weeping—was a girl's voice.

"Want some?"

She looked up as if startled.

There was the face of the girl who had spoken earlier. And held out in her hand—a piece of bread.

"....."

Laphra Lifra was speechless.

Bread. Food. Sustenance to link her life to tomorrow. A ray of light shining through the despair. Was she going to give it to her? That?

—*This is—Destiny—*

Laphra Lifra felt it.

Then she would submit. Betting everything.

As she reached for the bread, she introduced herself.

"Laphra Lifra."

"Laphra Lifra? Ah, your name. I'm Mei."

Saying this, the girl bit into the other half of the torn bread.

This was how the two of them met.

And in this place—

There was not a single soul to provide a witty retort.

"Hi."

The smile on the young man's face as he spoke was untroubled.

It was after the test was over and classes were finished. Shin and the others were preparing to head home.

"Yo, transfer student."

"It's Ridley," he said with a wry smile at Mark's greeting. "Besides, it's not decided that I'm transferring yet. It's a 'trial enrollment.'"

The one who said this was the young man who had appeared in the black magic-car this morning.

He had joined Shin's class under the pretense of being a relative of a retired soldier living in the city.

Soft-looking brown hair and a sweet face. During lunch, he had been surrounded and bombarded with questions by the few girls in the school, which was understandable.

"Trial enrollment? Not an entrance exam?" Shin asked this time.

"Yeah. Apparently... you do a short-term provisional enrollment, and that serves as the entrance exam. You try attending for a while, and if the student likes the school and the school decides the student can keep up with the classes, you're officially enrolled."

"Is there such a system?"

"First I've heard of it."

"Me too," Shin and Mark added to Rezelde's impressed comment.

Well, for the two of them who had enrolled normally from the start, it was a system that didn't really concern them.

"So, look. I'd like to ask you guys some things too. About this city and all. I'll drop you off at home in the car."

"The car?!"

The eyes of the three of them lit up at those words.

None of the three had actually experienced riding in a magic-car. No friend, acquaintance, or relative owned one.

Mark had a wide grin on his face and put his arm around Ridley's shoulder.

"All right! It's a deal! My friend... er, what was your name again?"

"I told you, it's Ridley," he said with a wry smile.

"Well, ask us anything about this city. Though I don't know if we can answer."

"Then let's take as long a detour as possible on the way back."

Everyone except Ridley was excited—or rather, practically floating—as they left the classroom.

"Incredible..."

Looking around the interior, Shin let out a murmur of admiration.

He was inside the black majic-car, having been invited by Ridney.

The driver's seat and the back seat were separated by glass, and the rear seats faced each other.

Shin usually looked at things with a bit of distance, but he seemed interested in this.

"It's bigger than a normal majic-car, isn't it?"

"I think they call it a 'limousine type,'" Ridney said in response to Shin's words.

The majic-car waited for everyone to board—and then it began to move.

The drop-off order was Mark, then Shin, and then Rezelde.

The one living closest to the training school was Rezelde, who lived in the dormitory, but since it was so close, they wouldn't be able to talk much if they went there directly. So they decided to drop off the other two first and then double back for Rezelde.

"But how does this majic-car work? I mean, obviously, I know it uses Law-Breaking Arts."

Rezelde asked Ridney while staring curiously at the interior.

—Law-Breaking Arts—when was that technology established?

The technique of collapsing the law of causality to cause various phenomena.

That's what they learn in school.

In human society, it's often used by employing ring-shaped tools called curse-rings engraved with patterns called curse-glyphs.

It reacts to a creature's magic or mental power—for example, it collapses the law of causality that says a stone must remain a stone, and makes it change shape, or shatter, or transform into another substance.

Once used for war, this technology has now become indispensable to people's lives... lighting homes, cooling and preserving food, pumping water from deep underground.

Majic-cars—more accurately called formula-driven vehicles—were developed using that technology as a replacement for horse-drawn carriages.

Shin knew that much. The trains of the recently built Transcontinental Railroad supposedly ran on the same technology.

However, he didn't know specifically *how* Law-Breaking Arts were being used.

Ridney, when asked, also gave a wry smile. "I don't know the principles in detail myself."

"What, you don't know?"

The one who said that pridefully was—surprisingly—Mark.

"Inside the engine, a Law-Breaking Art that causes tiny explosions is being triggered continuously, and that power turns the axle and the tires... well, in simple terms, that's it."

"Ooooooooooh!" Everyone let out a cry of admiration.

"Wait, what happened to you, Mark?! You're not your usual self! ...Are you... being brainwashed by someone?!"

"Ho-hoh. And what exactly does that mean, Professor Shindred?"

"It means it's hard to react when the funny guy suddenly starts saying something sensible."

Amidst the lively conversation, the scenery outside flowed by. Soon the topic moved from majic-cars to the training school, and then to this city—

"—By the way..."

Ridney brought up the topic when they were about halfway to Mark's house.

"I heard a rumor... that some incident happened in this city about a month ago?"

"—!"

Shin, who had been lazily looking out the window, snapped his gaze toward Ridney—and involuntarily locked eyes with Rezelde.

"Yes! That's the one!" Mark piped up, holding up a finger. "I don't know how much you've heard, but there was definitely an incident a month ago! And the perpetrator was—"

Lowering his voice for dramatic effect, Mark spoke the word.

"—A Deva."

Majou-zoku (The Demonic-Mystic Tribe).

Those with immense power who live on the Western Continent.

Because of that power, in the war fifty years ago—no, even now, they were sometimes likened to the devils of legend.

Of course, they weren't purely evil monsters; they were simply one of the races living on this land of Crosscadia.

However, they weren't exactly cooperative with recent international friendship policies, and because their true nature was difficult to grasp, the reality was that they were still feared by humans.

And roughly one month ago.

A single Deva appeared in this city and caused a disturbance, resulting in many deaths and injuries.

"I know that much," Ridney's reaction was quite casual, despite Mark's build-up.

Well, it was a major incident, so it was covered extensively in the newspapers. The news had surely spread to other cities.

But Mark, undeterred by that reaction, gave a grin.

"Well then... do you know this? The one who fought the Deva at that time was Professor Rezelde right here!"

Mark pointed at Rezelde with an exaggerated gesture!

"I figured."

"Weak reaction! Or rather, you knew?!"

"Well, yeah. The incident was a big topic in the city I was in before, and I heard rumors."

The official announcement was that the city guard had defeated the Deva.

However, if a member of the *Rinko-zoku* (Scale-King Tribe) who was studying abroad was at the scene, speculations and rumors of "the truth" would naturally circulate.

Ridney smiled at Rezelde.

"Besides... I could tell just by looking at you that you're a Drago."

Yes. Although Rezelde had a human-like appearance, he belonged to the race called Rinko-zoku living on the Northern Continent.

Their power was said to rival that of the Devas, and their original form was quite different.

However, he used Law-Breaking Art to transform into a form close to Humes and was studying at this training school. Apparently, it was part of the friendship policy

promoted by various races in recent years.

Even though it was a form close to Hume, one could see the differences if they looked. The shape around the ears was different, and if you looked closely, you could see his pupils were vertical slits.

If one knew a bit about the incident and saw Rezelde, it would be easy to connect the two.

—The actual situation of the incident was a bit different from what Mark described, but that was a secret between Shin and Rezelde.

"Mmm..." Mark groaned unsatisfactorily for a moment at Ridney's reaction.

"—I know! Then you surely don't know this!"

With a winning grin, he pointed at Shin.

"The one whose house was burned down by the Deva at that time was Professor Shindred! It was divine punishment for having a little 'lolita' live-in bride barge in shortly before the incident and being all lovey-dovey!"

"Wait. Hold on. There are so many parts of that to correct," Shin immediately interjected. However—

"What?!"

Ridney let out a cry of shock, even lifting himself off his seat.

"Don't you be surprised too, Ridney."

"No, this is an important point, Shindred-kun."

"Call me Shin. And why is that important?"

"The house burning down is one thing," Ridney said with a serious face, taking out a notebook and pen from his pocket.

"But we can't ignore the second half! ...Shin is into lolitas..."

"Don't write that down!"

Carrying the group, the majic-car traveled through the city.

It wasn't that he liked being alone.

However, he had never consciously felt that loneliness was painful.

His father was already gone by the time he was old enough to remember, and his mother had passed away two years ago—since then, Shin had been living alone in a small house.

Until recently.

The change came about a month—no, about a month and a half ago.

A girl who had lost her memory barged into his house.

The girl named Mei, whom Mark used as material to tease Shin at every opportunity.

...If phrased like that, one might expect a bittersweet development or a heartwarming story to begin... but unfortunately, she didn't seem to be that type.

Her personality was strange, the way she lost her memory seemed somewhat suspicious, she called Shin her "subordinate" even though she was a squatter, and she had strange powers. Most of all, from the moment they met, her life was suddenly being targeted by a Deva.

Deva.

Yes. The same Deva that had caused the disturbance in this city a month ago.

In other words, Shin was right in the center of the incident.

In the end, things were settled with the Deva... but the mystery of why Mei was attacked remained unsolved.

And so, she continued to squat at Shin's house.

Shin's financial situation wasn't exactly easy—but well, he could manage with just her, and he felt a bit bad about kicking her out. Besides, it wasn't so bad to have someone to welcome him when he returned home.

—He had thought that once or twice—

But while he was desperately trying to manage a tight household budget, if he came home to find his squatter's clothes had suddenly undergone a massive upgrade, it was only natural to feel a bit nostalgic for solitude.

"Ho-hoh."

Mei, who had come out to meet him, blinked curiously at Shin as he stepped through the front door.

"A new form of greeting? Slumping down and scratching the wall as soon as you get

home?"

"No... you... those clothes..."

Shin muttered in a tired voice, but he slowly pulled himself up and looked closely at Mei again.

Mei had been wearing a cheap shirt and pants until yesterday—no, even this morning. Now, they had changed into something else.

He didn't know much about women's clothes, but even Shin could tell that what Mei was wearing was by no means cheap.

And—

"...You've got... horns growing out of your head..."

Shin pointed weakly at Mei's head. Two red hair ornaments, shaped exactly like horns and the same color as her hair, were perched on her short, red hair.

Hearing that, Mei gave a happy, toothy grin.

"Ehehe. Jealous?"

"No, it's not about being jealous. I'm asking *what* on earth are those?"

"Yeah. I saw them when I went to the shop.

The price was about three times that of a normal hair ornament, but if it's red and looks like horns, I just had to buy them.

So, naturally, I got two."

"I don't follow that logic at all, but—"

As a rule, Shin tried not to pick apart Mei's nonsensical words and actions one by one.

It was exhausting.

However.

There are times in life when one must summon the courage to ask.

"...So. Those hair ornaments and the clothes... where did the money for them sprout from?"

"Ah. Heheh."

At that question, Mei flashed a nasty, triumphant grin.

"I bet 'Subordinate Number Two' is thinking I used your money without permission to buy these, aren't you?"

Of course, Shin had no memory of ever becoming her subordinate, but he basically let that slide too.

...By the way, though it truly didn't matter, "Subordinate Number One" was apparently a permanently retired title.

"I am thinking that. Am I wrong?"

She had been penniless since the day they met. And every part-time job she started had ended in her being fired after causing some kind of trouble.

Therefore, the source of the clothing money couldn't be anywhere but Shin's pocket.

—Or, since Mei called herself a "villain," it was possible she had stolen it. That would be an even bigger problem than her spending his money.

But she puffed out her chest.

"Hmph.

You've really underestimated me.

Even I understand the basic social-economic system: if I spend Subordinate Number Two's money recklessly, my own food budget gets tight!"

"Stop acting so proud of yourself."

"This was—!"

She pointed a finger up with unnecessary flair and said proudly,

"Purchased with buried treasure I successfully excavated!"

A deep furrow appeared between Shin's brows.

"...Buried... treasure...?"

"Yeah! In the corner of the kitchen, there's a spot where the floorboards come loose, and underneath it—lo and behold! A whole jar full of money!"

"Hahaha. Is that so?"

Shin patted Mei on the shoulder.

"That's quite a discovery. As a reward, let me tell you something good."

He kept patting her shoulder—hard.

"Ow, stop, that hurts..."

"We don't call that 'buried treasure'—"

Ignoring her protest, Shin continued to slap her shoulder firmly.

"We call that 'long-term living funds.' Got it?"

Whack! He finished with a final slap to her back.

Mei coughed—but she seemed more concerned with his words than the pain, asking timidly:

"...Um... what exactly does that mean...?"

"Well, to put it simply," Shin said with a smile like a devil.

"For the foreseeable future, your meals will consist of nothing but plain bread."

Mei learned a truth that day.

Namely—that throwing a tantrum doesn't make dinner any more luxurious.

The mansion's dining hall was a bit too spacious for just three people.

Even with several plates lined up in front of each person, they didn't occupy even a third of the massive table.

"Hmm—this shrimp is quite good. Is it local, Iris?"

The old man in the black suit asked as he cut into a steamed shrimp covered in cream sauce with his knife.

He was the same old man who had visited the training school in the magic-car with Ridney that morning.

He looked quite haggard, but his speech and demeanor were composed.

"They call it 'Karis Shrimp.' It's caught in the lake near this city."

The black-haired female driver—or rather, the woman now dressed in a simple black maid's outfit—answered in a businesslike tone without looking up, skillfully operating her own knife and fork.

"But—"

Ridney said, bringing a salad of shellfish and warm vegetables to his mouth.

"Hume food isn't half bad, is it?"

"Lord 'Ridney'."

Feeling the chill in Iris's tone, Ridney's movements stopped.

The woman continued flatly.

"You must be careful with your language at all times. Especially you. If an accidental tail slips out in conversation with your classmates, all this troublesome effort will have been for nothing."

"S-sorry... 'Iris'-san."

"Now, now. Habit is important, but surely it's fine when it's just the three of us, 'Iris'. Otherwise, we can't even have a briefing."

"That is true, I suppose."

"—So—"

The old man took a sip of pale, fragrant wine.

"Did you gain anything at the training school, 'Ridney'?"

"Yeah. First off: there's no need to fear that Drago much."

Ridney toyed with a piece of lamb seasoned with green pepper with the tip of his fork.

"Even though we're masking our scent with arts, he showed no sign of noticing us. Plus, as long as he's in Hume form, his abilities should be restricted just like ours. From what I saw, his transformation Law-Breaking Art is pretty sloppy. It's doubtful if he can even return to his original form on command. Our predecessor... Kelmizo, was it? He must have been taken down because he was either incredibly careless or caught by surprise."

"That is merely your personal opinion."

The old man—or rather, the one using the form of the old man who once lived here—checked the opinion of the one calling himself Ridney.

"In battle, one of the things you must never do is underestimate your opponent. I'm not telling you to overestimate them. Just give me accurate, objective information."

"I... I get it. Fine. Then here's another thing I found. I found our target's location."

"—Oh? —"

Old Klaus stopped his hand.

"There's a guy in my class named Shindred who has a strange scent... at first, I thought he was the target. But it seems his roommate is the one. The scent probably rubbed off on him while they were living together."

"I felt it too, though I didn't see her," Iris nodded.

"When I drove that Shindred home, I definitely caught an unusual scent. Though if you asked me *how* it was unusual, I'd be hard-pressed to explain."

"The report says the target looks like a female Hume, and a child at that," Old Klaus murmured, falling into a thoughtful silence.

Ridney said in a casual tone, "So, shall we do it?"

"Lord Ridney. Have you forgotten? Our mission is to investigate the target's identity and then eliminate them. What's the use of elimination without investigation?"

Iris rebuked him, but Ridney countered.

"But Iris-san, we can't exactly go around asking the target or those around them about her background directly, can we? I think making a move is the quickest and easiest way to find out."

"Don't be so hasty, Ridney. We can strike at any time. But there are plenty of things we can only do before that."

"Like what?"

In response, Old Klaus cut into his herb-steamed fish and said:

"Asking directly *is* one option. We'll find a suitable excuse and probe slowly while observing. Perhaps while sharing some of our delicious food."

The city was clearly visible from here.

Burjiolas, the Deva's Foreign Minister, looked out the crystal-covered window and stopped.

The light from the window shone through the three sharp, seashell-like horns growing only on the right side of his head, giving them a blue-green translucence.

Light flickered on the curse-glyphs embroidered with gold and silver thread on his ceremonial robes.

To a human—no, to any other race—his appearance might only inspire fear or loathing, but here in the land of the Deva, it was perfectly normal. A fellow Deva would have understood that the expression on his face was extremely peaceful.

He loved this view of the city the most—and at the same time, he hated it the most.

The world consisted of the sea and four continents demarcated by it.

Far from the Southern Continent where Shin and the Hume race lived was the Western Continent. This was the land of the Deva.

Feared by Hito and loathed by the Scale-King Tribe, they were nonetheless beings living on the land of Crosscadia. Naturally, normal lives existed there too.

This was the royal capital, Asoth, located near the center of the continent.

The passages connecting the towers of the royal castle were covered in hardened crystal structures reinforced by Law-Breaking Art, serving to prevent intrusion while also offering a view of the surroundings.

Burjiolas had stopped in one of these corridors.

Although it was the royal capital, it wasn't as large as the Hume cities Burjiolas had seen a while back.

In the first place, the Deva population wasn't as large as those "monkeys" who multiplied recklessly.

The scale of the city wasn't huge, but its beauty was different from those ugly cities that expanded by forcibly pushing nature aside. At least, that's what Burjiolas thought.

Of course, there were houses built on the ground here too.

However, most were supported by hardened crystal pillars created by Law-Breaking Art, appearing as white spheres in the void.

Individually, they looked chaotic and random, but when blended with the greenery of the earth, the city itself became a three-dimensional object of art.

The wings soaring through the sky were the Deva living in this city. In each of those art-like houses and each of those soaring wings, there were lives and stories.

But—

How much longer would this seemingly peaceful scene last? Lately, such thoughts occasionally crossed Burjiolas's mind.

Something was happening. Or about to happen. That much was certain.

He remembered the various things that had occurred recently.

Two months ago.

Receiving a royal order to dispose of a "strange-smelling Hume," it was none other than Burjiolas himself who traveled to the Hume city with an assassin.

He left the assassin in the Hume city and returned home—and after a while, he learned the assassin had failed the mission.

It was the following day.

He was summoned by the King—Gilgazord—again.

—*Minister, what do you consider the duty of the Foreign Minister to be?*—

The King asked this after dismissing everyone else.

Burjiolas didn't remember exactly how he answered. He felt like he had given some polite, textbook response.

But the King—Gilgazord—shook his head and said something Burjiolas remembered clearly.

—*This is my understanding: the duty of the Foreign Minister is to keep the other lower races appropriately in the dark.*—

"Lower races," he had said.

Of course, Burjiolas had no intention of viewing other races as equals to the Deva.

But now, with friendship policies between various nations—that is, various races—advancing, the King's statement was a bit excessive for someone in a position of responsibility.

The reason for dismissing everyone was now clear.

The King continued.

—*We Deva must continue to prosper. For that purpose, we can ignore minor risks or sacrifices. Send men to the Hume city once more. This time, bury that strange-smelling Hume we failed to kill before. If necessary, I don't care if you burn down one of their cities*—

A chill ran down his spine.

He accepted the direct order.

Refusal was out of the question.

He didn't ask why. If it were necessary, or if it could be told, it would have been explained without him asking.

But—what was this?

Why was the King so fixated on that individual? Who was this person who had to be eliminated even at the cost of burning down a Hume city?

This time, he sent three assassins. He had no intention of defying the royal order.

However, he had added a secret command to the assassins on his own.

If possible—probe the target's background and true identity.

They should be carrying out their mission by using Law-Breaking Art to change their appearance into Humes.

Burjiolas wanted to know. He decided he needed to know.

The identity of the one the King was fixated on, the one who had shocked Kelmizo, whom he had sent as an assassin before.

—*Perhaps that person*—

Burjiolas's gaze moved past the city and further beyond.

Toward the view he hated most.

A giant crater gouged into the earth.

Until fifty years ago, that was the location of the former Deva royal castle.

At a glance, the days seemed peaceful.

The city repeated its usual activities, and the training school Shin attended held classes on its usual schedule.

On the day of "Agar," the first class in the afternoon was practical swordsmanship.

Students in protective gear lined up in the training hall, starting with warm-up exercises. This was followed by swinging wooden swords.

Once that was over, they switched swords and began mock battles between students.

The swords for mock battles had weights in the handles and were made of bundles of flexible wooden branches. Although not as dangerous as real wooden swords, they still had a certain amount of offensive power.

Meanwhile, the protective gear consisted of a leather helmet with a mesh front, leather armor, and leather gauntlets.

It hurt if you were hit hard, and you could get injured if struck in the wrong spot.

In fact, many students did get injured. But that was never considered a major problem.

The paths for students graduating from the training school were either the army or the city guard. If you were going to whine about a class like this, you should rethink your way of life—that was the rough-and-tumble policy.

Shin was good at this class.

No—it could be said he was outstanding. In fact, lately, he had been disliked from the bottom of his teacher's heart because he didn't let the instructor land a single hit.

Naturally, for the instructor, losing to a student he was supposed to be teaching was a disgrace.

So, as for what was happening lately—

"Shindred!"

The instructor's gravelly voice echoed through the training hall.

He looked to be in his thirties or forties—but apparently, he was actually in his late twenties. With a high level of intimidation but a low level of likability, his "old man" face was now behind the helmet's mesh. He placed both palms on the pommel of his mock sword planted on the floor and said with king-like arrogance:

"You pair up with Ridney and try it!"

"Understood!" Shin's polite voice answered.

He wasn't trying to be a goody-two-shoes. In this military-style class, a half-hearted response could get you punched.

Shin and Ridney faced each other.

This was Shin's role in recent classes. In other words—he was like a substitute instructor.

Basically, he was paired with someone of lesser skill. But if there was a gap in

technique, Shin could hold back, so he wouldn't do anything reckless and injure his opponent.

It seemed the instructor intended to let Shin test the newcomer Ridney's skills this time.

"Hey, Shin. No need to hold back," Ridney winked along with his lighthearted remark from behind the helmet.

"That depends on your skill," Shin replied in kind and raised his mock sword.

"Here I come," Ridney said, and at that very moment, his figure vanished from Shin's field of vision.

—?!

He felt a faint presence. His five senses caught a minute—almost imperceptible—breeze or afterimage.

Relying on that, Shin twisted his body and swung his mock sword.

Crack! The sharp sound of mock swords clashing rang out close by. And—

—Urgh!

A small groan escaped Ridney, who had somehow circled around to Shin's side.

He probably didn't expect that strike to be blocked. But Shin was just as surprised. He didn't think such a blow would come.

Without pause, Ridney's second strike came. Shin barely managed to block that as well.

A third, fourth, fifth, and sixth time. The two mock swords clashed, ringing out. Gaining distance, closing in, Shin and Ridney traded blows.

Before long, the other students—and even the instructor—were watching the exchange with their mouths slightly open behind their helmets, but the two combatants had no room to worry about others.

For Shin, this was the first time in this class that the narrow field of vision of the helmet had bothered him so much.

Ridney's explosiveness was incredible. He vanished from sight so easily. If Shin failed to catch that afterimage, he'd take a direct hit.

The Shin of two months ago wouldn't have been able to dodge that first strike.

The previous battle with the Deva had certainly made Shin grow.

First, he cleared the agitation caused by the unexpectedly sharp attack. The method was simple: he just chanted the following spell in his mind.

—Compared to fighting a Deva, this is nothing—

Immediately, the ripples in his heart subsided. Once he was calm, he could see various things.

Ridney seemed unfamiliar with this mock sword. He even felt frustrated by the flexible blade.

And one more thing: it was clear that Ridney was visibly agitated.

He likely had a lot of confidence in his skill. Being parried had made him impatient.

In that case.

After a few more exchanges, finally—

Clang! The moment the two mock swords locked deeply, Shin twisted his wrist, used the flexibility of both swords to entangle the blades, and flicked them upward.

The hilt of the sword was wrenched from Ridney's hand.

The match was over.

Everyone watching thought so. Ridney's mock sword soared high into the air—and at that moment.

Thud! Ridney's roundhouse kick dug into Shin's side.

"—?!"

Exhaling a wordless breath, Shin was sent flying sideways and fell.

Roar! Letting out a beast-like howl, Ridney lunged at the fallen Shin!

—Ridney's mock sword, which had been tossed up, hit the floor—

That sound brought the instructor back to his senses.

"Stop!"

The gravelly voice that rang out stopped Ridney's fist, which was poised toward the fallen Shin.

"Ridney Bellcott! This is not a grappling class!"

"...Ah...!"

He stood up—looked around awkwardly—froze for a moment at the cold stares gathering on him—and finally looked at Shin at his feet.

"Ah... s-sorry! Shin! I got... a bit too heated!"

"Don't 'too heated' me... honestly... ow, ow, ow..."

Shin stood up, clutching his side with one hand.

"Are you all right, Shindred?"

"It's nothing serious," Shin answered the instructor's question.

It wasn't that he was protecting Ridney. He had flown spectacularly after taking the kick—but it really wasn't serious.

Shin and Ridney—only the two who were fighting knew. At the moment the kick landed, Shin had jumped sideways on his own to reduce the damage of the blow.

To be honest, even he was surprised that he had been able to react like that so instinctively.

"Ridney! As punishment, fifty laps around the training hall!"

"Understood! ...Sorry, Shin."

"It's fine."

At the extremely displeased instructor's command, Ridney put his mock sword in the corner and began running.

—Well, the instructor had reason to be displeased. After all, there were now two students more skilled than himself.

The black majic-car traveled through the city.

Crawling slowly, slowly.

A residential area in the early afternoon. From somewhere, children's voices at play could be heard on the wind.

Eventually, the car stopped in front of a house. The sound of the vibrating engine stopped, and the black door opened and closed.

The figure that stepped out walked straight toward the entrance of the modest one-story house and knocked on the cheap door.

"Coming—!"

An incomprehensible, carefree reply came from behind the door. Soon, small footsteps approached—

With a small click, the front door opened slightly.

"Oh?"

The red-haired girl who emerged looked up at the figure at the door—Iris, dressed as a driver—and tilted her head slightly.

"This is the residence of Lord Shindred Kailum, correct?"

"Shindred Kailum, Shindred Kailum... oh! Subordinate Number Two!"

"Subordinate?"

Iris couldn't help but ask back at the strange way of speaking.

Of course—Iris had visited here to investigate the target. She would find a suitable reason and talk to her directly. It was a risky move, but if done well, she could gather a lot of information.

But what on earth was this "subordinate"? Was the target building some kind of organization? Was this somewhat airheaded attitude just an act?

Suppressing the various thoughts that raced through her mind for a moment, Iris put her prepared lines on her tongue.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Iris, and I serve Lord Ridley Bellcott, a schoolmate of Lord Shindred."

"...Hmm, so... in other words..."

The girl furrowed her brows slightly, and then, apparently understanding, gave a small nod.

"A subordinate of a friend of Subordinate Number Two?"

Iris felt like she was being terribly mocked. She felt an urge to correct her with all her might, but somehow she restrained herself. She couldn't afford to waste time on something like this.

"If 'Subordinate Number Two' refers to Lord Shindred, then that is roughly correct."

"I see."

The girl gave a triumphant-looking nod. "I'm Mei."

"Mei-sama, then."

Iris learned the target's name for the first time. It hadn't been in the report from her failed predecessor, Kelmizo.

"Are you Lord Shindred's younger sister?" Iris tried a light probe.

Not that she expected the girl to blab about her background just from that.

Mei shook her head vigorously from side to side.

"A villain."

"—?!"

Iris nearly gasped.

To be called a villain so suddenly. Had she realized Iris was an assassin?

No, it was possible she was just bluffing. Iris hadn't let any agitation show on her face. She asked without changing her expression.

"A villain? Me?"

Mei shook her head vigorously again.

"No, no. *I'm* a villain. That's why it's okay for me to squat at Subordinate Number Two's house."

"I see."

She didn't—no, she didn't understand at all. Was she being mocked? Or was this kind of conversation normal among Humes? Or was the girl suspicious and testing her?

In any case, it would be difficult to find out her detailed background from this conversation... so Iris decided to change the subject.

"Lord Ridney may be transferring to the training school in this city... but there are some concerns regarding that. Specifically, the incident that occurred here a month ago."

"Ah, that."

Iris put on a somber expression.

"The Deva attack. Will such an incident happen again, or is there a possibility it could recur? Lord Ridney seems to like this city, but if such an incident could happen again,

we would have to reconsider the transfer. So, I was wondering if you could tell me the details of the incident."

Iris held out what she was carrying to Mei.

The girl tilted her head slightly and stared at it for a moment.

"...A box?"

"...There are sweets inside. I thought I'd give them to you in exchange for your story."

Suddenly, the girl broke into a wide smile.

"If that's the case, you should have said so sooner! ♡"

She happily accepted the box of sweets.

...Usually, you could understand that much without being told...

"I'll tell you as much as you want. Come in, come in."

"—Excuse me—"

At Mei's invitation, Iris stepped into the entryway.

The girl ahead of her walked into the door at the end of the hallway, clutching the box of sweets dearly.

"This way, this way."

Beyond was a small dining-kitchen. A small table and two chairs.

"Sit, sit."

Mei placed the box of sweets on the table and went to the kitchen in the back. As told, Iris sat in one of the chairs.

Mei called out from the kitchen.

"Do you want lukewarm water or slightly smelly tea?"

"...Lukewarm water, please."

Was she really being mocked? It felt like it.

Iris, not knowing Shin and Mei's financial situation, thought so.

Soon the girl arrived with two cups, placed one in front of Iris, and immediately began opening the box of sweets.

Iris took a sip from her cup. It was lukewarm.

"...So, about the previous incident..." Iris asked after putting down the cup.

"The incident where a Deva went on a rampage in this city... what really happened?"

She was asking a risky question. She thought so herself. What did "really" mean? She had prepared an excuse for if she was asked that back—

But ignoring her concern, Mei said while immediately biting into a cookie from the box:

"Well, they were targeting me."

"—!"

Iris felt her expression tighten clearly.

Mei had casually blurted out the truth.

Could she be onto Iris's identity? Had she exposed the truth so suddenly to show that petty mind games wouldn't work?

—Leaving the possibility that Mei just wasn't thinking anything out of her mind, Iris quietly clenched her teeth.

Was it a mistake to come here directly?! Had she jumped into an inescapable trap?!

Such thoughts raced through Iris's mind.

However, she remained calm on the surface.

"Targeting you... you say?"

"Yeah."

"The reason?"

"Don't know," Mei said, eating the cookie as if washing it down with water.

—I see... naturally, she has no intention of showing all her cards—

Iris read too much into Mei's attitude of being preoccupied with food.

"...By the way... who was the one who defeated that Deva?"

The official announcement said it was the city guard. But Iris didn't believe that. A Deva being defeated by some Hume—

"Subordinate Number Two."

Mei said casually, biting into a chocolate chip cookie.

"Subordinate..."

For a moment, Iris didn't understand.

Subordinate Number Two. Mei had called that Hume named Shindred by that name.

"...You mean... Lord Shindred?"

"Yeah."

"No way."

"For real."

A Hume defeated a Deva? Impossible. Or was it a blatant lie meant to say she had no intention of showing her hand?

Or did it mean Shindred had delivered the finishing blow after someone else had weakened the Deva?

This girl named Mei—how much had she caught on to? She seemed to have realized that Iris already knew something about the situation. Well, surely she hadn't realized Iris's true identity...

Iris's thoughts raced.

She shouldn't have realized Iris was an assassin yet. Otherwise, she wouldn't be eating the cookies so defenselessly.

—Wait—or was she eating them specifically to show that she had read Iris's hand and knew there was no killing intent right now?

If that was the case—she was an opponent not to be underestimated.

She had intended this for reconnaissance and information gathering, but perhaps finishing her off right here was the right answer.

The target was defenselessly eating cookies in front of her. She didn't look particularly strong. That slender neck looked like it could be easily snapped with a quick twist.

Perhaps now, when the opponent recognized there was no killing intent yet, was the chance to strike? Could she be killed surprisingly easily right now?

An impulse close to curiosity, rather than killing intent, rose in Iris's heart. Her right hand, hidden under the table, twitched slightly—

"—Um—"

Mei's words froze Iris's movements.

It felt like a checkmate after reading the slight killing intent that had sprouted.

For Mei, she just felt like saying something because Iris had suddenly become silent.

"Are you an international student too, Iris?"

"I-international student? Why?"

"Because look."

Mei bit into a butter cookie and said it.

So casually.

"Even though you're a Deva, you're going to the trouble of being in Hume form."

A chill ran down Iris's back.

She had been seen through?! Her transformation into Hume form?!

Before she knew it, Iris was standing up.

—Who on earth is this?! This Hume named Mei?! She's read my aim, my actions, and even my identity!

She stared at the girl in front of her in shock.

Having her identity pointed out, which she thought was impossible, her thoughts were in chaos.

—If she's this capable, then my predecessor's failure makes sense. He was likely caught in some sophisticated trap. I can't be careless either. In that case—

Strength poured into Iris's arm.

—As I thought, I should just kill her right here—

Twitch! Iris trembled slightly.

At the intense killing intent that was suddenly poured upon her.

It wasn't—from the girl in front of her.

From the sensation, the opponent was—

—Above?!

Of course, it was impossible for them to be in the room. Then they were on the roof. They had sensed Iris's killing intent toward Mei and sent their own killing intent through the roof.

—This little girl—

Iris backed away in shock.

—Did she have an ambush waiting, even considering the possibility of me attacking impulsively?!

In that case, she had no choice but to retreat quietly. Forcing the issue would only lead to a counterattack. Iris bowed to Mei.

"...I see. Thank you very much for telling me so much."

She somehow managed to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Oh? Are you done already?"

Mei asked with a blank look while biting a cookie.

To Iris's eyes, it looked like a transparent act.

"...Yes... it's enough. Thank you very much."

She turned on her heel and walked to the door. Sweat seeped from her back.

—*Hey. Do you think you can leave safely?*— She wondered if such a voice would be called out from behind. She walked forward in tension—

Through the door—

Through the hallway—

Through the entrance—

She gritted her teeth. The humiliation came later.

In the end, she had made it outside without incident.

Which meant—was it a declaration that she could do whatever she wanted with Iris at any time?

She turned and looked up at the roof, but there was no sign of anyone. Had the ambush already left? Or was it just a blind spot from here?

She knew the target wasn't one to be taken lightly. But she would make her regret that

composure someday.

Keeping her humiliation and hatred hidden, Iris headed for the magic-car.

Without realizing that most of the emotions she felt were due to misunderstanding and overestimation—

"Oh?"

Mei noticed it when she had finished about a quarter of the box of cookies.

In the dining room facing the small backyard.

A golden head was peeking through the window.

"Oh!"

Recognizing the face, Mei raised a hand slightly.

"Oh!"

The other person, only peeking through from the eyes up, echoed back.

It was the woman she had seen a few days ago fighting a dog for food—she had given her bread several times since then.

"You came today too."

"She was on the roof. The whole time."

The words spilled out in fragments, her voice clear and delicate as a glass bell.

"Huh. Sunbathing?"

Mei spoke as she picked up yet another cookie and bit into it—only then finally noticing the longing glint in the woman's eyes.

"Want one?"

"Is it okay?"

Even as she asked, the woman didn't wait for an answer; she climbed right over the window frame.

That day, Shin was in high spirits.

After being kicked across the room by Ridney during class, the other boy had offered him a ride home in the majic-car as an apology.

The joy of riding in a majic-car again sent Shin's mood soaring. He didn't even notice that the female driver's demeanor had shifted subtly compared to his last ride; he simply accepted Ridney's repeated apologies with a wave of his hand and returned home feeling grand.

But his happiness...

"I'm... home..."

...evaporated the instant he opened the front door.

The scent. He smelled it.

That sweet, savory aroma lingering faintly in the air—cookies?!

Shin ran. He cleared the hallway in a single breath.

(Well, it wasn't a particularly long hallway, but still.)

He flung open the door to the combined kitchen and dining area—

But. All that remained on the table was a cruelly plundered empty box. Only the lingering scent and the oil stains on the paper bore witness to the fact that this had once been a container for cookies.

—I didn't make it in time—

Lead-heavy regret filled Shin's chest. His bitten lip turned a deeper shade of crimson.

Then—

"Oh? You're back."

His carefree roommate's voice came from behind him.

She had probably been in another room and came out when she heard him.

"—Hey—"

Shin spoke, still facing away from Mei at the doorway.

"You ate them."

"I"

Sensing something genuinely abnormal in his voice, Mei instinctively took a hesitant

step back.

"All by yourself. You ate them. The cookies. Without leaving. A single one. For me."

A dark aura began to smolder and rise from Shin's frame.

"No, wait. It was a finder's fee?"

"I don't care what the reason is! I will never forgive you!"

Shin barked the words and spun around—

In that split second, a golden afterimage cut between Shin and Mei.

—?

The completely unexpected intruder sapped Shin's momentum.

Standing there as if to shield Mei, glaring at Shin with hostile eyes, was a woman he had never seen before.

She looked to be about his age. Long golden hair. A beauty—but dressed in strange, unfamiliar clothes.

"Who are you!?"

"...Who the hell are *you*?"

To her sharp demand, Shin replied with a hollow, deflated voice.

"Ah. Er."

Mei popped her head out from behind the woman and stepped between them. She pointed at Shin first.

"This is Subordinate Number Two~"

"I'm Shindred Kailum. I don't recall ever becoming your subordinate."

Since there was a stranger present, Shin felt he couldn't just let Mei's delusions slide, so he offered a correction. However—

"Number Two? *Number Two!*"

Hearing Mei's words, the woman's face lit up with a triumphant smile. She puffed out her chest proudly.

"Then who is Number One!?"

"Currently a permanently retired title~"

—!—

At Mei's lackadaisical reply, the woman's expression stiffened.

"Number One... retired... Number Two... Guh...!"

Overwhelmed by a sense of defeat, she slumped to her knees on the spot.

But she wasn't the only one overwhelmed. Shin felt equally bleak.

...Another weirdo showed up...

"And this one~"

In the midst of it all, Mei—the only one maintaining her usual pace—pointed at the crumpled woman.

"A loser of the Law of the Jungle."

"Guh...!"

The woman slumped even further, putting both hands on the floor. Shin managed to pull himself together.

"I don't get it. Name? Where did you come from?"

"Name. I think it was... Flutter-Flutter or something."

"Sounds like she has a weak constitution."

"Lafra Lifra."

The person in question finally corrected them.

"So? What's the—"

Shin started to ask, but a possibility flashed in his mind. He placed a hand on Mei's head.

"Don't tell me! Are you... an acquaintance from before she lost her memory!?"

But Lafra Lifra, still looking down, weakly shook her head from side to side.

"Lafra Lifra... received food... from Mei. So... I stay... by her side."

"I understand even less now. Fine, let's just sit and talk. For now, just take a seat over there."

Shin gestured toward the dining table. Lafra Lifra finally looked up slowly and muttered:

"You act so high and mighty."

"...Look... I don't know what the deal is, but this is *my* house. I don't know if Mei invited you or what, but you don't break in and then call *me* 'high and mighty'."

"Eh!? This is... Subordinate Number Two's house?"

Lafra Lifra looked back and forth between Mei and Shin in surprise.

"Well, you can think of it that way for now," Mei said.

"It's like that forever. ...Except for the 'subordinate' part. And you! Just call me Shindred... or Shin. Got it?"

"I understand."

Nodding with sudden obedience, Lafra Lifra stood up and took the seat Shin had offered.

Shin sat opposite her. Mei left the room momentarily, returned with a chair from another room, and sat at the side of the table.

"Now. First... where did you come from and why? Let's hear it."

At Shin's question, Lafra Lifra sat with her back perfectly straight.

"The East. Nenes Totol told me to. So I came."

"The East."

Lafra Lifra's expression was dead serious. There was no sign she was joking.

Shin let out a small sigh.

"No, look... 'The East' alone doesn't tell me anything."

"The Eastern Continent. That is what I mean."

"Right. But a continent is huge—"

Shin froze mid-sentence. He understood. He understood the meaning.

"...The Eastern Continent... you mean...?"

Shin asked in shock, not even trying to hide the tremor in his voice.

"Are you... by any chance... a **Lycanthrope** (Possessed Spirit Race)?"

"I am."

The casual confirmation left Shin dazed, leaning back into his chair.

Lycanthropes.

Of course, he knew of them. At least as academic knowledge.

He remembered learning about them in the lower grades of the school he attended as a child.

A race that lives on the Eastern Continent with unique cultures and customs.

Their appearance is identical to humans, making it impossible to distinguish them by sight alone. However, through the curse-glyphs engraved on their bodies, they possess the ability to transform their physical forms into beast-men, granting them immense physical power.

Looking only at their original forms, they seemed like the race most suited to interact with Humes. But because their cultures are so vastly different, even now with inter-species friendship being promoted, mutual understanding hasn't progressed much.

—That was the extent of Shin's knowledge.

I see. If she's one of them, her strange clothes and behavior make sense. But—

"...But... why come all the way here...?"

It wasn't a place you could just visit for a casual stroll.

Granted, Burgess City was on the relatively northern side of the Southern Continent—which is to say, not *that* far from the other continents.

But "not far" was purely relative. To reach another continent, one would have to ride the cross-continental railway for several days and then cross the ocean separating the lands by boat.

Now that regular service between continents had been established, it wasn't impossible, but it wasn't something done without serious resolve.

In response to his question, Lafra Lifra cast her gaze toward the empty air.

"Lafra Lifra... was supposed to perform the **Rite of Faith**. But... the path froze, and I could not. The elder, Nenes Totol, said: 'Go to the Hume continent. Find your destiny.'

And there... Lafra Lifra found Mei."

"Me? Oh, stop, you're making me blush~"

Mei puffed out her chest proudly for some reason.

"Wait... just wait a minute."

Shin tried to organize Lafra Lifra's words in his cluttered head.

The Rite of Faith. The path froze. He didn't know the specifics, but based on context—

"So... a ritual or festival unique to the **Rewarders** (Lycanthropes) fell through... and you came to this continent following an elder's oracle or divination... is that it?"

"That is mostly correct."

Lafra Lifra nodded, albeit with a hint of dissatisfaction.

Shin, his heart filled with a bad feeling, asked:

"...And... I hope I'm wrong, but... that destiny you found is..."

He pointed hesitantly at Mei.

"Yes."

Lafra Lifra nodded firmly.

"Why *this*?"

"What do you mean 'this'?" Mei interjected.

"She... gave me... the strength to live."

Lafra Lifra looked straight back into Shin's eyes.

"Strength to live?"

"Food and such."

"...I see..."

Shin slowly turned toward Mei.

Mei jerked her chair back. In a quiet voice, he said:

"I thought the bread was disappearing faster than usual... so you've been feeding a stray Rewarder who was about to collapse on the street, have you...?"

"Ah. No. Look. Er. It's a venture capital investment in the future?"

Mei spoke in a rare panic—likely fearing her food situation would become even more dire. Shin gave a small sigh.

"Well... that part is fine. It would be a hassle if someone went hungry and collapsed around my house. But the problem is—what are you going to do now?"

Faced with his gaze again, Lafra Lifra said decisively:

"Lafra Lifra will stay by Mei's side."

"Wait, that's—"

Shin's cheek twitched.

Staying by Mei's side.

That meant she was going to move into this house.

To begin with, the economic situation of Shin's household was already quite strained just by having Mei, a self-proclaimed amnesiac, freeloading there.

When his mother passed away, she had left behind just enough to support Shin alone until he graduated from the training school and found a job—

But if the number of mouths to feed doubled, the situation naturally changed.

There had been various unexpected expenses already.

He had tried to get Mei to work part-time, but she was utterly useless.

If one more person was added to the mix, the situation would become hopeless.

Shin scratched his head in frustration.

"How do I put this... you might have your 'resolve' and 'destiny' and all that, but we have 'kitchen circumstances' here... er, I mean, we have to worry about the money to buy food."

He didn't want to be rude, but she didn't look like she could pay rent.

If she had money right now, she wouldn't have been begging bread off Mei... and even if she worked, their cultures were so different. He didn't think she could hold down a normal job.

However, Lafra Lifra looked Shin straight in the eye.

"It's okay. Lafra Lifra will manage her own food."

"Oh?"

"I can... catch pigeons. And things."

"Don't do that."

—I heard that house makes its guests catch and eat pigeons—

The day such a rumor started... Mei and Lafra Lifra might be fine, but Shin wouldn't be able to bear it.

"Then what should I do?"

"Go home. To your country."

"I refuse."

Lafra Lifra said it flatly.

Shin thought for a moment.

"Then take Mei and go back to your country."

"In that case—"

"Wow, cold! Human trafficking?"

Mei puffed out her cheeks.

"You're just deciding things on your own. And am I 'takeout' now? Were all those days we spent nurturing our friendship a lie?"

"We didn't 'nurture' anything."

"Hmph. Always has an answer for everything."

Mei crossed her arms, furrowed her brow, and muttered to herself as she thought hard.

"...Hmm... Rafra's loyalty to me is higher, but she doesn't seem like she has much life-skills... as I thought, if I'm going to be a parasite, Subordinate Number Two is better?"

"You're calling yourself a parasite."

"Honesty is a virtue."

"I disagree."

Whether she heard Shin and Lafra Lifra's conversation or not, Mei eventually looked up with determination.

"Then, it's decided! We'll look after Lafra Lifra at our place until I've reached a final decision."

"I see."

Despite Mei's arrogant proclamation, Shin remained calm.

"How noble. So your bread rations will be cut in half, right?"

Mei turned to Lafra Lifra.

"How about you go home to your country alone?"

"I refuse."

Lafra Lifra said flatly.

...These two... maybe I really should just find a logical reason to hand them over to the city guard...

Shin thought, quite seriously.

"—Is it true—that—"

After hearing the two of them finish their story, a silence followed.

Old Klaus—or rather, the being using his form—muttered quietly.

The living room in a corner of the mansion. The afternoon sunlight leaking through the window only served to make the shadows in the room stand out more darkly.

Three shadows were now cast across the unnecessarily large table with a silver tray sitting on it.

"Yes," Ridley answered. A tiny, oily glint of resentment dwelled in his eyes.

"That man, Shindred Kailum... he was quite the expert. Even though he's just a Hume, if you give him a sword, he's a formidable opponent."

"Hmm—"

Klaus peered at Ridley's expression for a moment.

"So, in that mock battle during the swordsmanship class—did you lose? To him?"

"I didn't lose!"

Ridney raised his voice and stood up. If the carpet's pile had been a bit shorter, the chair he kicked back would have made a thunderous sound.

"With this body, my reach is different than usual! I was just confused by that! And he's just someone who's a bit good within the confines of a polite swordsmanship class! In a real fight, there's no way I'd lose to a mere Hume!"

Despite 'Ridney's' outburst, Klaus only asked calmly:

"And the Drago?"

"—Ah...! No... er..."

At that voice, Ridney finally came to his senses. He slumped back into his seat.

"Sorry... regarding the Drago... I didn't observe him closely... he's not bad, but he doesn't seem exceptionally skilled... I think..."

"I see. In other words—"

Old Klaus shifted his gaze to Iris.

"The target, Mei, has taken a Drago, a Hume swordsman, and an as-yet-unidentified third party as allies, and is building some kind of organization. Is that it?"

"Almost certainly," Iris nodded with confidence.

The time Iris had met Mei and sensed killing intent from someone hiding on the roof was the same time the Drago and the Hume called 'Subordinate Number Two' were at the training school. Therefore, a third subordinate must have been protecting the target. It was only natural to think so.

"At least four. We are three. We thought we had the numbers... but apparently, that's not the case."

Muttering with a sour expression, Klaus picked up a pen near the silver tray.

He dipped the nib into the inkwell and began writing down the key points on the paper at hand.

According to the information they had received beforehand, the only ones who could be enemies were the target and the Drago.

Yet, after investigating, this was the current situation.

Burjiolas, who had dispatched them, likely planned to ensure the mission's success by

sending more assassins than the opponent...

The grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticked away the seconds.

Eventually, Iris spoke up at the right moment.

"Most likely, once the target—Mei—defeated the previous assassin, she anticipated the next attack and began gathering subordinates. She is a tactician of extraordinary caliber."

She stated this tragic misunderstanding with a straight face.

The possibility that Mei was just a foolish girl never occurred to her. Nor to the other two.

After all, the previous assassin *had* been defeated.

They didn't know much about their predecessor. But a fellow Deva, even with a Drago's help, wouldn't be defeated by a mere fool and her friends.

That was a shared understanding among everyone in the room, one that didn't even need to be voiced.

"Should we call for reinforcements then?"

"No—"

Klaus didn't even pause his pen at Ridley's suggestion.

"According to Iris's report, the opponent seems aware of us. If we waste time waiting for reinforcements, the opponent will use that time to strengthen their personnel or take other measures. We must hurry. I intended to probe slowly—but it seems we no longer have that luxury. We won't be able to fulfill the order to investigate the target's identity... but killing her is what's most important. Currently, they outnumber us. Therefore, the method we should take is—"

"Divide and conquer?"

Klaus nodded at Iris's words.

"We will break down the enemy from the edges. We can assume the target is always with the unidentified ally. The Hume travels between the school and the target's house. The Drago travels between the school and the dormitory. Therefore, the one who has time alone is—"

"—The Drago—" Ridley muttered.

"That's how it is. Next, we'll take out that Hume at the training school. Once that's settled, the target and her guard. Once the target is killed, the operation is over. It doesn't matter if the guard remains. The operation begins—"

Klaus's pen stopped.

"Tonight."

He signed the paper and looked at the two of them. They seemed to have no objections.

With a nod, Klaus placed the paper with the details on the silver tray.

The silver tray, supported by four legs, floated above the table. He touched its edges with both hands—

...Ruuuuuuuuuuuuu...

A low groan escaped the old man's mouth.

The paper placed on it slowly sank into the silver tray as if falling into water.

Eventually, it vanished completely into the silver tray—and then, it fluttered out from underneath.

Blank.

It was a tool they had brought from their own country. One of a pair of twin silver trays crafted from the same silver.

Right now, in their country, the paper placed on the other silver tray would be showing the words Klaus had written.

The report had been sent. Now, there was only action.

"Then—"

Klaus slowly rose from his chair.

Iris and Ridley stood as well—and the three shadows headed together toward the mansion's basement.

The city is situated by a sprawling lake.

Inflowing rivers divide the city, and Burgess City's center lies along those rivers.

There is a hill where the city chief's residence stands, the city guard headquarters, and the training school.

A short walk from that training school, in a forest facing the river, stood a very old but solidly built building.

It was one of the student dormitories built back when the training school was still called a military academy.

The era of full boarding was in the past, and with the number of dormitory residents having plummeted, it wouldn't be surprising if this dormitory had been slated for consolidation and demolition—

But currently, this dormitory had a single resident.

None other than Rezeld, the international student from the Scale-King Tribe's country in the Northern Continent.

This dormitory, which hadn't been used for a while, had gas and water restored just for Rezeld, and streetlights were installed from the forest entrance to the front door.

While it was exceptional treatment—it was also a convenient form of isolation.

To others, Rezeld was a race with higher combat capabilities than themselves. No matter how much inter-species friendship was preached, or how Rezeld transformed into a Hume using Law-Breaking Art, the fear lurking deep in the human heart wouldn't just vanish.

Just in case—though no one had probably thought through what that "just in case" actually meant—one foreign student was placed in this dormitory.

Rezeld had already realized those circumstances—but he was enjoying his solitary dormitory life in his own way.

Perhaps to silence accusations of isolation, the building was well-maintained despite its age. What were originally about three rooms had been joined together, a bathroom and toilet installed, and it was given the name of a "Special Room."

It was quiet, spacious, well-equipped, and as an international student, he didn't need to pay dormitory fees. The living funds he received from his country were more than sufficient.

A short walk through the forest would lead to plenty of places to eat. Complaining would be a luxury.

After dinner, he mostly spent his time reading Hume books he had bought in the city. For Rezeld, who was still not used to the local culture and customs, they were a valuable source of information.

Under the light created by Law-Breaking Art on the ceiling, Rezeld quietly turned the pages of his book that day as well.

—?

Suddenly, Rezeld looked up.

He heard a sound from outside the door.

It was the creak of floorboards.

This place, which used to be a dormitory, was structured so that entering the front door led to a small entrance hall. From there, a corridor extended, with Rezeld's room door facing it.

Naturally, the front door and the room door could be locked, but he occasionally forgot to lock the front door. It seemed he had done it again tonight.

But he couldn't think of anyone who would visit him at this hour. If it were a thief, the business hours seemed a bit early.

Was it a drunk who had lost their bearings, or a fool who knew it was practically empty and came in for a prank? Either way, he couldn't just ignore it.

If the dormitory was trashed because he forgot to lock the door, it would be Rezeld's responsibility.

He placed a fallen leaf as a bookmark on the page he was reading and stood up.

He headed to the room door—and there, he listened quietly.

One set of footsteps. Slowly approaching.

Still far.

Confirming the distance, Rezeld unlocked the door, opened it, and stepped into the corridor.

The footsteps stopped.

A straight corridor. Ahead was the lobby, leading to the wide-open front door. Beyond that was the darkness of night.

The corridor was dim.

The Law-Breaking Art lights in buildings like this were activated and maintained using the magic power of those present.

It didn't require much magic power, but one person's power couldn't keep the entire building brightly lit.

While it would be possible for Rezeld, a Drago—the Hume engineers who renovated this place likely didn't realize that, so the corridor only had a few faint, dim lights constantly burning.

Under that orange-tinted gloom—

A shadow stood.

"Pardon me for the late hour," the shadow said.

Rezeld relaxed.

It was a familiar sight. Not that he knew the person.

It was an unknown man in his late twenties, but he was wearing a black, high-collared jacket and trousers. A tall hat, and a rapier at his waist.

It was simply the familiar city guard uniform.

Ever since the Deva attack, city guards would occasionally come by such places on patrol.

It was likely because they thought Rezeld was the one who had defeated the Deva.

Most likely, they had noticed the front door was unlocked and came to investigate.

"By any chance—was the front door unlocked?"

"Yes."

"Sorry. I forget to lock it sometimes."

—*Please be careful*—the guard would say and turn on his heel.

Rezeld had imagined such a scene—but the guard remained there, as if wanting to say something more.

"Um. Is there something else?"

"...Yes... actually... I heard a strange rumor. Since the source is unclear, I wasn't sure what to do, but I thought it best to warn you, so I thought I should tell you..."

Encouraged, the guard gave a hesitant reply.

"A rumor?"

"Yes... it's a long story if I go into detail... but they say they saw a Deva in this city again."

"__"

Rezeld gasped slightly.

He hadn't thought everything was over once he defeated the Deva before—but the fact that such a rumor was spreading...

Of course, it could just be a rumor or a hoax, but either way, he needed to find out for sure.

"If you don't mind, could you tell me more about that?"

"I don't mind... but it will be a long story."

"That's fine. For now, it's a bit much for a standing conversation, so please come into my room."

"If you say so..."

Rezeld nodded, turned, and opened his room door—

In that instant.

What was it that he felt?

The faint smell of burning air. Or perhaps a breath like the howling of the wind.

Without time for conscious thought, Rezeld leaped sideways, kicking off the floor and diving into his room.

CRASH!

The sound of the thick wooden door shattering came from behind him.

An offensive Law-Breaking Art fired from behind. If he had taken it directly, he wouldn't have escaped unscathed.

But there shouldn't have been anyone behind the guard—

No way.

He looked back over his shoulder.

Appearing at the broken doorway was—the guard from before.

Then there could only be one truth.

He was the one who had attacked Rezeld.

But why!?

AURGH!

The guard howled. A voice a Hume could never produce.

An offensive Law-Breaking Art was coming—predicting that, Rezeld leaped sideways.

At the same time, a pale purple curse-ring glowed in the air in front of the guard. The light that was born clung to the doorway, becoming a wall.

"!"

Rezeld understood. The opponent's goal.

Most likely—

He hurriedly dove into the bathroom. And—

Flame erupted within the room.

The heat consumed everything in an instant. It turned his half-read book and the fallen leaf within it into charcoal, and still unsatisfied, it expanded the air in the room—

BOOM!

The explosion could likely be heard from afar.

It shattered every window pane and stained the interior in black and sepia.

The only one unharmed was the guard—or rather, the being in the form of a guard—who had cast the barrier at the entrance.

He released the art and stepped into the room.

...Crunch...

What used to be the carpet gave only the sensation of burnt charcoal under his boots.

Perhaps because of the momentary high temperature, there were no signs of a fire breaking out.

Even so, if he dawdled, the real city guard would show up, alerted by the explosion.

"—Did you do it—?"

The voice came from the opposite side of the room—from outside the window.

The figure in the guard uniform looked that way.

Beyond the window was the darkness of night. But there, a figure peeked in—from above.

A terribly thin—winged human.

If one described it that way, some Humes might protest.

A gaunt body reminiscent of a soul crawled up from purgatory, with disproportionately thick hands and short claws.

Wings like those of a beast of burden carrying the darkness grew from its back, and from within its blood-colored hair, five or so crooked, short horns grew in random directions.

—A Deva—

This was their true form.

There was, of course, not a trace of Ridney as he appeared when he was transformed.

The figure in the guard uniform had placed the barrier at the entrance, and he had made the flames erupt in the room.

"I will check now. Kilkelius. You search over there."

Saying this, the figure in the guard uniform stepped further in.

The Deva called Kilkelius also entered through the broken window, looked around, and stepped further in—

"—Commander!"

Called by the Deva, the figure in the guard uniform went toward him—

To the bathroom, which was also cruelly scorched.

On the floor—a human shape, turned pitch-black and charred, lay there, no longer moving even a twitch.

"...It looks like there was no need to keep Sis as an ambush."

"We're retreating."

Ignoring Kilkelius's lighthearted remark, the figure in the guard uniform spoke.

The two of them leaped from the window into the night—

The true city guards didn't arrive until some time had passed—

"...By the way... Rezeld is late, isn't he?"

Shin muttered this into a lull in the conversation, just as the first period was about to begin.

It was a typical morning scene. Students at the training school were gathered in classrooms and hallways in their respective cliques, engrossed in chatter that ranged from the trivial to the significant.

Shin, Mark, and Ridney were in their usual spot—by Shin's desk, overlooking the schoolyard through the window.

"Now that you mention it... he's not... here," Mark said, looking around as if only just noticing.

"Well, anyone can be late once in a while," Ridney added in a casual tone.

Then—

"Hey! Did you hear!?"

The sound of the classroom door slamming open coincided with a classmate's shout.

"They say the international student's... Rezeld's dorm burned to the ground last night!"

The silence was brief before a buzz of excitement and worry erupted.

"Wait—hold on a second!"

Shin stood up, his face pale, and hurried toward the classmate. Ridney and Mark followed close behind.

"A fire... are you sure about this, Ridge!?"

Shin pressed him for confirmation. After all, the bearer of this news was a man known as the class "Clumsy One" (to Mark's "Jester One"). There was a high chance he had misunderstood a rumor.

"Yeah... I was just passing by and heard the teachers talking... they said there was a fire last night and the place is almost a total loss."

Behind Shin, Ridney moved subtly closer, with Mark standing beside him.

"And... what about Rezeld!?"

"I don't know... I only caught a bit of it while walking past..."

Amidst Ridge's voice, Shin didn't notice the silent "incantation"—a compressed spell—slipping from Ridney's lips.

And then—

The offensive Law-Breaking Art triggered.

The blast slammed into Shin's side, sending his body flying. He crashed into desks and chairs—

A heavy silence fell over the classroom. Every eye turned to the assailant and the victim.

"...Ugh... gah...!?"

The one who had fallen managed to pick himself up. He looked at his opponent with a gaze of confusion rather than anger.

"...W-Why...?"

The fallen 'Ridney' looked up in shock at the face of his attacker.

It was the face of Mark—the "Jester" who had been standing right beside him.

Yes. At the exact moment Ridney had tried to blast Shin from behind, 'Mark' had hit Ridney with a Law-Breaking Art from the side.

But Mark didn't possess a **Cursed Ring**—the tool Humes require to manifest such arts.

"Too bad," he said, tracing something in the empty air with his left hand.

"I am not Mark. Well, I expected you to move like this... but so it was you."

The boy's form blurred, his voice distorting.

"Your transformation art is impressive, masking even your scent."

And then, appearing in his place was—

"Rezeld!?"

It was Shin who cried out in shock.

The fallen 'Ridney' was speechless. Looking down at him, Rezeld spoke:

"I suppose I looked like a charred corpse? It was just a laundry blanket I threw over myself that got scorched. My kind is quite resistant to heat. I was worried you'd stick

around to investigate further... but you didn't want to run into the city guards, did you? I'm glad you left so quickly."

"What on earth is—"

Before Shin could finish, he suddenly spun around. His kick whistled through the air, but his target—'Ridge'—had already leaped back to the far side of the hallway.

"What are you doing, Shindred!?"

Shin glared at him intensely.

"You always call the teachers 'Geezers,' not 'Instructors.' And you call me 'Shin.' But more than that... that 'killing intent' you just directed at Rezeld? That wasn't normal."

'Ridge's' eyes changed slightly, filling with a cold, piercing light.

"Be careful," Rezeld said, his eyes never leaving Ridge. "There should be a third one."

No need for an ambush—Rezeld remembered one of his attackers saying that last night.

"Everyone—please leave this place as quickly as possible," Rezeld said loudly but calmly to the entire classroom.

"This is going to be a battlefield. Because these two... are **Devas** who have changed their forms."

At his declaration, the students froze—not out of fear, but sheer bewilderment.

It was understandable. Being told two classmates were actually transformed monsters wasn't easy to swallow instantly. Two months ago, it would have been dismissed as a bad joke.

But they all knew about the previous Deva attack. And Rezeld was currently standing there looking exactly like Mark. It couldn't be a lie.

Even Shin, a participant in the previous events, couldn't process it for a second.

Only three people remained calm: Rezeld and the two imposters.

'Ridge' moved first. Seeing Shin's hesitation, he slid along the hallway to gain distance.

Kioooooooooooooooooo!

The sound that tore from his throat was not human. It was a compressed Law-Breaking incantation used by Devas and Dragos—a language humans could never utter.

Shin snapped out of it then.

"Rezeld!"

He shouted a warning and leaped to the side just as 'Ridge' unleashed an offensive art. The light-strike targeted Rezeld, shattering and piercing through the thin classroom wall. Having been warned, Rezeld narrowly avoided it.

Chaos erupted.

A student screamed. They might not have believed Rezeld's words, but they knew something unnatural was happening. Panic spread like wildfire, and students surged toward the other exit.

In that turmoil, the four-way struggle continued.

'Ridney' sprang up to the sound of the screams. 'Ridge' in the hallway prepared another art against Rezeld.

Shin charged in!

He was an unknown variable. To 'Ridge,' an unarmed Hume was a non-factor. He never expected that someone who knew he was a Deva would charge him just as he was triggering a spell.

Shin's tackle hit him dead-on. The two tumbled into the hallway.

Both, wanting to avoid a close-quarters brawl, rolled further away and sprang to their feet to regain distance.

Inside the classroom, Rezeld and 'Ridney' fired arts at each other simultaneously.

Rezeld let out a silent grunt, dodging a spear of light. Meanwhile, Rezeld's own attack shattered the classroom ceiling before 'Ridney' even had to dodge. Stone fragments showered down, and the screams of fleeing students grew louder.

He hadn't missed. He had *missed on purpose*.

Just before firing, Rezeld realized that if 'Ridney' dodged, the attack would hit the students crowding the exit. He diverted his aim at the last second—and this was the result.

Fighting here was a disadvantage.

"Shindred! Outside!" Rezeld shouted, jumping into the hallway.

"Got it!" Shin replied, retreating toward Rezeld without breaking eye contact with his

opponent.

"We'll get everyone involved. Move to the open. I'll handle the defense with my arts."

"I'm counting on you."

Exchanging whispers, the two turned and ran down the hallway.

"It's dangerous! Run!" Shin yelled at the students from other classes who were watching with morbid curiosity as he sprinted past.

'Ridney' stepped into the hallway. He could see Shin and Rezeld running away.

Making a fool of me...

He glared at their retreating backs, letting his anger guide his Law-Breaking Art.

Kyuguruuuuuuuuuuuuu!

In response to the high-pitched, compressed incantation, the world warped. Light patterns—**Cursed Glyphs**—appeared and vanished in the space before him. They were too fast for Hume eyes, but to a Deva, they were clear.

Each glyph held meaning, forming a chain that disrupted the laws of the world. He unleashed a field of interference waves that vibrated molecules at high speeds. To an observer, it looked like a spear of flame—but the name didn't matter. All that mattered was that whatever it hit turned to ash.

However—

Ruooooooooon!

The circular glyph Rezeld deployed—a physical manifestation of a Cursed Ring—acted as a shield, neutralizing the flame spear and vanishing it into the void.

"Damn it!"

'Ridney's' blood boiled further, and he fired another offensive art, only for Rezeld to block it again.

But the other one—'Ridge'—was calmly rolling a different incantation on his tongue.

...Yuu... rururuuuuuuuuuuui...

He traced glyphs in the air with both hands, exhaling the incantation on a thin breath. A high-output glyph sphere appeared vividly before him. As it unraveled, it turned into "Cursed Ribbons"—glowing bands that crawled across the hallway floor like shining

snakes.

Just as Shin and Rezeld reached the stairs and began to run down toward the first floor—

CRACK.

The mortar-built hallway split with a roar. Only the one who cast it likely noticed that the split followed the exact line the ribbons had crawled. The severed hallway became massive chunks of debris, swallowing the students' screams as it collapsed onto the floor below.

'Ridney' stood speechless at 'Ridge's' flashy attack. If he were told that was actually a Law-Breaking Art meant for civil engineering, one wonders what face he would make.

Regardless, 'Ridge' unleashed his next art.

Flame.

It enveloped the space where the dust of destruction hadn't even settled. The roar shook floors, walls, and ceilings. Windows shattered into a million pieces.

"Did we get them!?"

Amidst the echoing boom and the wind, 'Ridney' shouted, squinting into the smoke. Such flashy attacks were powerful but not ideal for ensuring a kill. Confirming a body was a hassle, and if the target survived, they could use the cover to escape—or counterattack when the assassin approached to check.

"I don't know. But we don't need to confirm," 'Ridge' said, turning back toward the now-empty classroom. "The plan has changed. From this moment on, we proceed with full force to eliminate the 'Target.'"

"But...!" 'Ridney' followed him. "If those two are alive, they might interfere while we're fighting her."

"That is why," 'Ridge' said with a sharp glance, "I said *from this moment on*. We're reverting. Hurry, Kilkelius."

"I... I understand..."

Called by his true Deva name, 'Ridney'—Kilkelius—nodded reluctantly. He wanted to kill Shin and Rezeld with his own hands, but there was no choice.

The two stripped off their shoes and shirts. Standing half-naked, they looked at the ceiling and howled.

...Oooooooooouruaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...

A long, harmonized incantation that sounded like a lonely wail.

Shining cursed ribbons wrapped around their bodies, turning them into humanoid cocoons of light.

The cocoons warped.

...Ouuuuuaaaaaaagooooooooooo...

The voices continued, but it was impossible to tell if it was an incantation or a groan of agony from the physical strain. The cocoons swelled, distorted, and spiked outward from within—then burst.

The light dissolved into the air, revealing two monstrous, winged forms.

One was the thin, five-horned Deva who had attacked Rezeld last night—Kilkelius.

The other was a massive figure with two twisted horns growing from the right side of a golden mane. A Deva who had been Old Klaus, then a nameless guard, and finally Ridge—**Sezenore**.

The two panted heavily, thick sweat on their brows. The pain of rapid physical change lingered, but they had no time to rest.

"...But Commander Sezenore..." Kilkelius steadied his breathing and looked at the golden-maned Deva. "Even if we go now, isn't it a bit reckless without weapons or armor?"

Transformation arts were convenient, but they didn't change equipment. They were both currently half-naked. They hadn't expected the Drago to survive or things to escalate this quickly. Their armor and weapons were back at the mansion they had seized. Returning for them would waste too much time.

Sezenore curled his lip into a sneer and held out his right hand.

"It's three against two. Or are your claws just for show, Kilkelius? Have more confidence in your own talons."

"...I understand."

As a Deva, there was no arguing with that. Kilkelius nodded.

"Good."

Sezenore crossed the classroom and leaned out the open window—

WHAM!

His wings unfurled against the wind, and his massive body leaped into the sky. Kilkelius followed. Ignoring the students in the schoolyard who were beginning to panic at the sight of them, they glided through the air and hovered near an oak tree at the edge of the grounds.

"Lugria!"

At Sezenore's call, the branches of the oak tree swayed.

The third Deva appeared.

She was half a head taller than Sezenore. Her long black hair was tied back, and a pair of horns grew from just above her temples. She had apparently been hiding in her true form from the start, wearing steel gauntlets and leather armor. The armor made it hard to tell, but her chest was slightly curved.

It was the female Deva who had taken the form of Iris, the mansion's maid and driver—**Lugria**.

"The situation has changed. We are going to kill the target immediately. I'll explain the details on the way."

"Understood."

Without questioning, she unfurled her wings.

The three Devas took to the sky to extinguish the life of their true target: Mei.

"...What...?"

Mark Forlybar froze as he saw it from the street corner.

What was happening?

There had been signs of something wrong. He had been called into a side alley by Rezeld, the international student, earlier that morning on his way to school. Rezeld had taken him to a quiet, empty park.

—*Rezeld. I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm strictly normal. Sorry, I'm not interested in guys—*

Rezeld hadn't played along with Mark's joke at all. In a dead-serious tone, he had said:

—*I need to borrow your appearance—*

Before Mark could ask what he meant, Rezeld let out a high-pitched groan. Glowing glyphs appeared around him. He used some kind of Law-Breaking Art—that much Mark understood. As the light faded, Rezeld's form blurred and changed into an exact copy of Mark.

—*Whoa! Is that a transformation art!?*—

Rezeld, using Mark's voice, had spoken quickly.

—*I'm just using wind to interfere with light and sound. Borrow me your face and voice for today. I need you to stay away from the training school. I don't have time to explain, I'll tell you later*—

Mark had agreed instantly. He wasn't exactly obsessed with attending school, and skipping in his uniform sounded fun in its own way. He spent the morning wandering around, snacking on an apple.

Then he heard the sound. A distant, heavy vibration in the air.

His natural curiosity led him toward the noise. From a street corner, he saw smoke rising in the distance.

—*The school*—

Mark knew instantly. This is what Rezeld had meant.

But what happened? Was everyone okay?

Before he knew it, Mark was running.

He had one simple, greedy wish: He didn't want to lose a single friend. He wanted everyone around him to be happy—or at least, he wanted misfortune to stay away.

It was an impossible wish. Everyone has their own burdens, life isn't all happiness, and everyone dies eventually. Eternal happiness doesn't exist.

Still, Mark prayed.

He prayed that his friends wouldn't disappear. That misfortune wouldn't visit the people around him.

It wasn't just out of kindness. He was *afraid*. He was terrified of misfortune.

When he was six, a neighborhood friend was killed by a robber while the parents were away. The event itself was a shock, but what shocked Mark more was the change in the boy's mother. She had always been kind and smiling, but after the incident, her smile

vanished, replaced by a haunting, demonic expression even a child could recognize.

That was what misfortune did. It changed people.

From then on, Mark had acted excessively cheerful. He was called a "jester," but he didn't care. If he could keep the shadow of misfortune from his friends' faces—if he could replace it with a smile, even a forced or mocking one—he would gladly be the fool.

But recently, the shadow of misfortune had been flickering. The Deva attack. Shin's house burning down. When he first heard about it, he felt dizzy with fear. He was worried about Shin, but more than that, he was afraid of that shadow returning.

That was why he felt such relief when Shin returned to school without that shadow on his face.

But now.

His heart was pounding for more than just the running.

The smoke was definitely coming from the school.

As he got closer, the noise and the scent of misfortune grew stronger.

Black smoke rose from the building. Several vehicles from the city guard and fire brigade were parked in the yard. A crowd had gathered at the entrance, and limp students were being carried out and loaded into vehicles.

The air was thick with the scent Mark hated most: the smell of misery. Cries, groans, curses, screams—a sickening blend of negative emotions.

"Hey! You can't go in there!"

A city guard stationed at the gate stopped him.

"...What... happened..." Mark asked, his eyes hollow.

"...I don't know the details..." the guard hesitated. "...The hallway... apparently collapsed."

"...The smoke..."

"...A fire started there."

The guard was being vague.

"Anyway, it's dangerous. Stay back."

"I'm a student here..."

"I can tell by your clothes," the guard said, likely explaining because he realized Mark belonged there.

"...Everyone is..."

"I said it's dangerous!" The guard held him back.

"—Mark!"

A voice called him. A classmate ran over, his uniform filthy but seemingly unhurt.

"What happened!?" Mark shouted.

The classmate stopped, looking at Mark's unusual intensity with fear.

"Mark... right? The real one...?"

"Of course I'm—"

Mark stopped himself. It wasn't "of course." Rezeld had literally turned into him right in front of his eyes.

Mark tried to calm himself, forcing a smile.

"I'm me. I'm just a bit freaked out by all this. So, what happened?"

"Devas."

At that word, Mark—and the guard—froze.

The monster named Misfortune had appeared in the form of a Deva.

Mark's head felt heavy. His ears rang. The classmate was still saying something, but it no longer reached him.

Shin didn't know what had happened.

His memory stopped at the moment he and Rezeld began running down the stairs.

"Shindred."

Rezeld's voice snapped him back.

Shin finally noticed the horrific state of his surroundings.

Large chunks of debris were scattered nearby. The area was scorched black, and students lay on the ground, groaning. He looked up to see a massive section of the

second-floor hallway completely gone.

He and Rezeld were standing in the middle of it.

A cold lump formed in his chest—was it fear, anger, or despair? He didn't know.

"...What... is this..." he whispered.

The Devas had attacked. That much was clear.

"Are you alright?"

Rezeld's voice was calm as ever, almost out of place. Shin looked at him blankly. He seemed fine, though a bit soot-stained.

Shin didn't know how they had survived. He didn't care.

But the groans of the students—that sound wouldn't leave his ears.

"The Devas are—"

Rezeld was cut off by a commotion from the schoolyard.

"Let's go."

Following Rezeld, Shin moved toward the noise without thinking.

When they stepped outside, they saw three sets of wings flying away.

"That direction—" Rezeld looked back over his shoulder. "Shindred, that's toward your house. Their target is indeed Mei. Let's go!"

Rezeld sprinted off without waiting for an answer.

Shin followed, his heart still freezing cold.

This was moments before Mark reached the gate.

The wings glided down from the sky.

Straight as a hawk diving for prey.

An offensive art was fired from the air.

The roof and walls exploded and shattered, revealing the interior of the house.

Then, fire erupted.

Crimson tongues of flame licked through the house in an instant, vanishing as abruptly

as they had appeared.

The three winged figures hovered in the air, glaring down at the ruined, small house.

No movement. No sign of anyone inside.

Instead, a scream rose from nearby.

Sezenore looked toward the sound. A neighbor had looked out and seen them.

"Is that her?" he asked.

"No," Lugria shook her head. "The age and hair color are completely different."

"I see."

Sezenore turned back to the target house. Still no movement.

"I'll go down and check," Lugria said, diving through the hole in the roof. She vanished from sight for a moment.

Soon, she flew back up, looking confused.

"No one is there."

"No one...?" Kilkelius frowned. "Isn't that strange, Sis? They should know they're being targeted. It's not like they'd just go out shopping at a time like this."

"I don't know. They're just not there."

"...Careless..." Sezenore gritted his teeth. "Back to the mansion!"

He looked at the two as they turned.

"If the Drago is alive, he would have alerted them last night. It's no wonder they've cleared out. And this morning, they used the Hume as a decoy to lure us to the school. Why?"

"A diversion!?" Lugria gasped.

Sezenore nodded. "They're trying to destroy our base, even if it means using the Hume and Drago as pawns."

The reality was vastly different, of course.

But for the three Devas, who believed Mei was either a brilliant tactician or a complete fool, this was the only logical interpretation.

"...This is bad...!" Kilkelius's voice was tinged with panic.

Even as Devas, losing their equipment, funds, and base in a foreign land would be a major setback.

It was a groundless worry, but they didn't know that.

"Go!"

Following Sezenore's command, the three took to the sky again.

Shin stopped in the middle of the shopping district.

Despite being just before noon on a weekday, the area was crowded with people. The smoke from the school could be seen from here, but the news of the Deva hadn't spread yet, so there was no panic.

"...Shindred?" Rezeld stopped and looked back.

Shin stood with his head down, panting. Rezeld was also slightly out of breath.

"...I know you're tired... but we have to hurry..."

"That's not it!" Shin roared, still looking down. "...Why...!"

An angry groan leaked through his gritted teeth.

Shin's mind had stopped working the moment he saw the collapsed hallway. He had only run because Rezeld pushed him.

But as he ran, his brain slowly started functioning again—and a directionless anger surged in his chest.

What was this? What the hell was happening?

The scene he had just witnessed—the collapsed hallway, the groans.

At first, he couldn't think, but as he ran, it hit him.

maybe people were dead. maybe someone he knew was among them.

The moment he thought that, he felt sick.

This wasn't the first time people had been hurt because of the Deva. Guards had died during the previous incident.

But did the impact on one's heart change so much depending on whether the victim was someone you knew?

Shin's runaway thoughts spiraled.

Why was this happening? Because of the Devas. They were after Mei, and they targeted Shin and Rezeld because they were near her, and his classmates got caught in the crossfire.

But why were they after Mei in the first place? Who *was* Mei, anyway? She was the key to everything.

Yes. Everything started when Mei arrived. If she hadn't appeared—

A dark thought surfaced in his mind.

If Mei disappeared...

He stopped walking. His body trembled violently—was it fear, or a chill at his own selfish thoughts?

But the runaway train of his mind wouldn't stop.

If Mei were gone, the Devas wouldn't attack. Shin and his friends wouldn't be in danger. If Mei were gone—like, if she were killed by the Devas right now—

—It's not Mei's fault—

Reason tried to fight back.

But his spiraling mind mocked the logic. Mei said she had no memory, but was that true? Even if it were, could anyone say the pre-amnesia Mei was innocent? Who could say she hadn't done anything to deserve being hunted by Devas?

He felt nauseous.

He didn't know who he was angry at. The Devas? Mei, for bringing this absurdity into his life? Or himself, for even considering abandoning her?

"What's wrong?" Rezeld asked.

Shin didn't know how to answer. He couldn't move. He couldn't find the will to move.

"Shindred!?" Rezeld's voice grew louder.

Then—

"Oh—Subordinate Number Two~"

A carefree voice came from the side.

Shin's head snapped up.

Mei and Lafra Lifra were walking over from a nearby shop.

"Are you guys shopping too? You look pretty gloomy for it, though."

Mei stopped beside Shin and asked.

The timing was the worst.

That carefree expression, that carefree voice... it grated on Shin's nerves.

The scene of the broken school building. The groans of the students.

It all flashed back in his mind.

Before he knew it, Shin had grabbed Mei by the collar.

"Shindred!"

"What are you doing!?"

Rezeld and Lafra Lifra both cried out in alarm—

Shin let go of Mei.

"...It's a Deva," he muttered, barely able to force the words out as he averted his eyes from her.

"A Deva?"

It was Lafra Lifra, not Mei, who reacted.

Shin didn't answer; instead, Rezeld nodded. This was his first time meeting Lafra Lifra, but Rezeld seemed to sense she wasn't an enemy—and realized now was not the time for formal introductions.

"Yes. A while ago, a Deva came seeking Mei's life. We managed to defeat that one... but now there are three. They came in disguise to the training school and attacked Shindred and me. We're safe, but several students were caught in the crossfire."

Rezeld spoke with a hint of irritation, directed more at Mei than Lafra Lifra.

As for Mei—she was looking down or away, refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

"The Devas likely headed for Shindred's house," Rezeld continued regardless. "If Mei and the others hadn't been out, they would have been attacked. Once they realize no one is home, they'll start searching. Standing around here is dangerous. Let's move

elsewhere; we can explain the details then."

Lafra Lifra nodded resolutely. "Understood. Where to?"

"I'll lead us somewhere suitable. Shindred! Mei! Hurry!"

Rezeld took their hands and pulled them along half-forcibly. Neither Shin nor Mei resisted, following quietly in a silence where not even a glance was exchanged.

The city fell into chaos.

It was to be expected. The memory of the previous Deva disturbance was still fresh. Now, a new incident had occurred—and with three Devas this time. The training school in the heart of the city had been struck, and students were among the casualties.

Furthermore, rumors began to fly that the Devas had been disguised as Humes. This information sparked widespread panic. If they could look like anyone, then the person walking right next to you could be a Deva ready to strike. Paranoid delusions spread like a virus, and some residents even began to flee the city.

In a stylish white public hall on a small hill in the city center, the greenhorn mayor fainted upon hearing the report. After being slapped awake by his aide, he immediately ordered the military to mobilize.

Burgess City did have a military presence, but it wasn't large. When the former military had been split into the Army and the City Guards, the Army's share had become quite small due to "friendship policies" with other nations. Their budget was slim, and their equipment was far from cutting-edge.

They had "tanks," but they weren't the modern Law-Breaking-powered types rumored to be in development at the capital. They were archaic contraptions: basically armored carriages pulled by horses, fitted with a ramming prow for frontal assaults and a turret for a powerful offensive Law-Breaking Art. In short, they were moving iron-clad battery platforms.

On the mayor's orders, about ten of these old tanks—crewed by soldiers with zero combat experience—clattered out of the military facility on the outskirts of town, parading toward the "Deva Subjugation" in a show of hollow bravado.

The result was that the constant movement of City Guard vehicles and the sight of tanks rolling through the streets only fueled the rumors and deepened the city's panic. The mayor, perhaps the most confused man in the city, was far too overwhelmed to realize he was making things worse.

"...This area should do for now," Rezeld said as they stood among a cluster of trees.

It was too small to be called a mountain but too large for a mere hill—a patch of lush green near the outskirts of Burgess City. Rezeld didn't know why such a place remained undeveloped, but students were often made to run here during training classes.

Hidden just a short distance from the mountain path snaking through the thicket, they would be difficult to spot.

Shin sat down silently on a bed of fallen leaves, while Mei sat on a fallen log a short distance away.

"First, we need to organize our information and assess the situation—"

Rezeld leaned his back against a tree trunk and looked at Lafra Lifra, who was standing diagonally behind Mei.

"This is our first meeting... right? Judging by your scent, are you one of the **Possessed** (Rei-jin)?"

He saw through her nature instantly. Lafra Lifra nodded.

"Lafra Lifra. You too... a little different from Humes."

"Yes. I'm a **Drago**. I'm here on an international exchange program. I've used a transformation art to take this form. Things happened, and I got involved in this incident. Why are you in this city?"

"Lafra Lifra can no longer perform the **Shin-pou-no-gi** (Rite of Divine Offering). On the orders of the Elder, Nenes Tote, Lafra Lifra came to find 'Destiny.' And here, Lafra Lifra found Mei."

She gave the same cryptic explanation she had given Shin before.

However—

"...Shin-pou-no..." Rezeld's voice was tinged with hesitation.

"You know it?" Shin asked. He didn't want to stay silent and look like he was sulking forever. He wasn't interested in Rewarder rituals, but he was curious.

"I don't know the details, but... I've heard stories," Rezeld replied heavily. "The Rite of Divine Offering... it's a unique ritual of theirs. The chosen one throws themselves into the **Great Rift Valley** on the Eastern Continent."

The Great Rift Valley—a massive tectonic fracture running across the Eastern

Continent, visible even on world maps.

Shin didn't grasp the meaning immediately. "Th-throw themselves? You mean..." He frowned. "They'd die."

"They would die. Naturally," Rezeld said.

That was simply how it was.

Shin went silent for a moment before snapping back. He spun toward Lafra Lifra.

"Wait a second! So... what!? You're the sacrifice for a sacrificial ritual!?"

"Not a sacrifice!" Lafra Lifra snapped, her eyebrows arching. "The Rite of Divine Offering—the chosen one offers their life to serve the Gods! It is an honor!"

"But you'll be dead!"

"I will simply go to the Gods!"

"That's called being dead!"

"No! The chosen ones become life, lightning, wind, heat, and time to protect the land of Crosscadia! Lafra Lifra was supposed to become 'Life'!"

"No, look, that's exactly what I'm—!"

"Shindred." Rezeld cut Shin off with a quiet voice. "The Rewarder culture is unique. Now is not the time to debate their customs."

"...But... well... fine... I guess..." Shin muttered, still feeling unsettled.

What did it mean? Was Lafra Lifra's "finding destiny" just a way to find a reason or a method to resume her suicide ritual?

Setting aside the scowling Shin, Rezeld turned back to Lafra Lifra. "At any rate—due to some circumstances, you—pardon me, Lafra Lifra—could not perform the Rite and came here as instructed by the Elder."

"Yes," Lafra Lifra said, looking somewhat happy.

"And you met Mei—and believe she is the destiny the Elder spoke of?"

"Yes."

"Why is that?"

"She gave food. Also, the scent."

"I see—" Rezeld murmured thoughtfully, then shifted his gaze to Shin. "By the way, I've heard the Rewarders take great pride in their names. They don't use first-person pronouns, and they dislike being called 'him' or 'her.' It can even lead to conflict, so keep that in mind."

"...Really?" Shin muttered. Lafra Lifra nodded.

"Then—" Rezeld said, probing as if testing her. "Right now, Mei is being targeted by Devas. If Mei is your destiny, Lafra Lifra—what will you do about this situation?"

"Easy," Lafra Lifra said. She made it sound truly simple, even flashing a smile. "Lafra Lifra will defeat the Devas. To protect Mei."

"Wait a minute!" Shin shouted.

"Good girl!" Mei shouted at the same time.

In the moment Shin was stunned into silence, Mei stood up and draped an arm around Lafra Lifra's shoulder—given their height difference, Mei was practically hanging off her.

"Now that's what I'm talking about, Lafra Lifra! You're nothing like a certain 'Subordinate Number Two' who sees us shopping together and attacks me out of a jealous fit!"

"Wait! Is *that* how your brain interpreted what happened earlier!?" Shin interjected.

"Is there any other reason?" Mei asked with a straight face.

Shin froze for a moment, then slumped his shoulders and let out a long sigh.

"...No... fine... whatever... but..." He looked at Rezeld. "But listen, how can we drag her—I mean, Lafra Lifra—into this mess?"

"Are you against it?" Rezeld asked coolly.

"Of course I am! Lives are on the line!"

"Precisely because lives are on the line," Rezeld countered, staring straight into Shin's eyes. "A battle is coming. Before that happens, it's best if everyone's position and resolve are clear. That was my only thought. Or do you have a better idea for resolving this situation other than fighting?"

"A better idea...?" Shin thought for a second. "Well, normally... we'd explain things and leave it to the City Guards..."

Shin didn't actually want to fight Devas. In fact, he'd prefer to avoid it entirely. During

the incident a month ago, the Guards hadn't believed their story, forcing them to cross blades with the Deva themselves.

But this time was different. The Devas had caused a scene at the school; the Guards were already moving. Surely they wouldn't be ignored this time.

But Rezeld said coldly, "I see. So we explain things to the Guards, and then I (the international student), Mei (the person of unknown origin), Lafra Lifra (the illegal immigrant), and you (the civilian) will be moved to separate locations and picked off one by one."

"...Ugh..." Shin groaned.

True—if he thought about it, that was likely exactly how the Guards would handle it. They wanted a tidy resolution. Even if they didn't hand Mei over to the Devas, Shin would certainly be sidelined. That would be a victory for the Devas: they could wait for an opening to strike Mei and then vanish.

—But if Mei were gone—

The thought from before reared its head in Shin's mind again. He tried desperately to suppress it, but wanting a thought to go away didn't make it disappear.

"Fine, so relying on the City Guards is out—" Shin babbled, trying to change his mental state. "So the problem is how the Devas move and how we move... By the way—" He had to check something. "Why were you disguised as Mark this morning? It was like you knew the Devas were coming."

"I did know. I was attacked yesterday as well."

"What—!?"

Rezeld turned to Mei and Lafra Lifra. "This will all be new to the two of you, so I'll explain in order. About a week ago, a transfer student came to the training school. He was accompanied by an old man and a driver. In hindsight, all three were Devas using transformation arts. We only realized this today. Therefore, the enemy count is likely three."

Lafra Lifra listened with intense focus. Mei, on the other hand, had a blank expression; it was hard to tell if she was listening or just staring into space.

"The disguises were perfect. They even masked the Deva scent... I didn't notice their true identities either. They seemed to be observing for a while, but last night, they made their move. They attacked my dorm. That's when I first realized they were here. One of them had taken the form of a City Guard I'd never seen before. I managed to escape by

letting them think I was dead."

Rezeld continued, "I confirmed the Devas' presence and their ability to transform, but since I didn't know whose forms they usually took, I couldn't explain the situation to anyone. Just saying 'the Devas are someone' would only cause paranoia. However, if their true target is Mei and they're clearing out the people around her, I judged that Shindred would be next. That's why I borrowed a classmate's appearance to stay close to him. My read was correct—the Deva disguised as the transfer student and another classmate tried to attack Shindred. We managed to get through that, but from here on, they likely won't hold back. That is where we stand."

"...Hey, I don't really get it though..." Shin said. "Ridney might have been a transfer student, but Ridge was at the school way before that. How does that work? He couldn't have been a Deva the whole time, right? So they swapped at some point? And what exactly is this transformation art? I heard about it in class, but I don't know the details. They looked exactly like Humes. Even you didn't notice. And you looked exactly like Mark..."

Rezeld crossed his arms in thought before slowly speaking. "I don't know if the Law-Breaking Arts Devas use are identical to the ones we Dragos use... but there are different types of transformation arts. They achieve the same goal of changing appearance, but—"

"The way I look like a Hume now is a Law-Breaking Art that changes my physical structure. My base strength and ability to use arts don't change, but obviously, I lose my wings and can't fly. My reach also changes depending on if I turn into a tall person or a short one. The reason 'Ridney' and 'Ridge' attacked with only arts at the school was likely because their reach was different from their true forms. Since this changes the body itself, it's not a simple spell. When I took this form, several Dragos skilled in such arts performed a ritual over a long period.

There is a way for one person to change their form in a very short time, but I've heard it puts a massive strain on the body. The Devas are likely using that method, knowing the risks. On the other hand, when I was Mark at the school, that was an art that uses air to wrap oneself in an illusion. In that case, it's just an illusion—if you touch it, you'll know. If a Deva uses an illusion of a Hume, you'd still feel their horns or wings if you touched them. So the Devas were likely using the former—physical transformation.

...'Ridge' probably swapped with the real one using that method. Likely this morning..." Rezeld said in a somber tone. "This morning, I stopped Mark on his way to school, borrowed his appearance, and asked him to stay away. Whether it's physical change or an illusion, the key is the image. How well you can picture the voice and appearance

you want determines the success. When I changed my body back in my country, I didn't have a specific model, so the details are slightly off from a normal Hume. But this morning, because I had the model 'Mark' right in front of me, I could create a perfect illusion. Meaning—the Deva who took Ridge's form likely used Ridge himself as a model."

"...! Then... what about the real Ridge...!?" Shin's voice was raspy.

Rezeld lowered his eyes quietly. "The possibility that a Deva made a polite request... is low, I suspect."

Shin bit his lip. The atmosphere grew heavy.

Ignoring the weight, Rezeld cut through the silence. "The point is, it's extremely dangerous for us to split up. We can't let our guard down just because we see a familiar face. We don't know who they might be disguised as."

"I can tell," Mei said casually.

Shin and Rezeld both snapped their heads toward her.

"Are you serious!?"

"Yep."

"How do you tell them apart?"

"How? I mean... I just look at them. The woman who brought cookies before—I knew she was a Deva the moment I saw her."

Silence fell for a heartbeat.

Shin stood up, his boots crunching on the leaves as he stepped toward Mei.

"What... did you just say?"

"Huh? I said... the person who brought the cookies was a Deva dressed like a Hume. I knew when I saw her..."

"Why," Shin asked in a low, quiet voice, "didn't you say so immediately?"

"Well, I ate the cookies," Mei said with a bashful, deceptive laugh.

In an instant, Shin grabbed Mei's shoulders with both hands, his grip tight.

Mei let out a small gasp, but Shin shook her shoulders violently. The image of the broken school hallway, the groans, the thought of Ridge... it all swirled in his head like

a chaotic mess.

"Why!? Why didn't you tell us!? If you had, none of this would have—!"

"Shindred!"

"Let go of Mei!"

Rezeld's and Lafra Lifra's voices didn't reach him.

"Why...!?"

Mei gasped again, and Shin's movements suddenly stopped. He yanked his hands away.

"Even if she had said something—" Rezeld's calm voice filled the void in Shin's mind.

"Would you have believed her? And if you did, what could you have done? The Guards wouldn't have believed such a story. Even if they had, if Mei is the only one who can tell, the Devas would have just changed into someone else. The result would have been the same."

"...But... we could have done *something*... something..." Shin groaned. He turned and walked away, stopping by a tree with his back to the three of them.

"Mei, are you safe?" Lafra Lifra asked worriedly. Mei nodded.

"Yeah. Just because they're Devas doesn't mean they're bad people, but he's so narrow-minded."

Shin didn't respond to her comment, whether she meant it as a joke or not.

Rezeld let out a small sigh. "...Well. The problem is what to do next." He looked at Mei and Lafra Lifra. "I suggest a counter-offensive. I don't believe the City Guards will find them in their disguises. The Devas were disguised as someone named Ridney Bellkot. I know where the mansion he lives in is."

'Ridney' had told him the location while they were making small talk; that part was likely true, to build trust.

"We strike there first, seize their equipment and funds, and destroy their base. That alone will make things much harder for them. There's a chance they've already left... but we might end up in a fight there. Any thoughts, Mei?"

"Huh?"

Suddenly having the conversation turned to her, Mei gave a small shudder and

stammered, "Ah, um. I don't have any. But, the curse-rings and other things I used before... they're at... they're at my house."

When they had fought the Diva assassins who came before, Shin and Mei had used several tools procured through various means. Those items were still kept at Shin's house.

Rezelde wore a contemplative look. "I see... there is a possibility the Divas are staking out the place, but... it is necessary for us to prepare our equipment."

"Laphra-Lifra will fight, too," the Rewarder girl said, her eyes harboring a color of firm determination. "Mei, Laphra-Lifra's destiny. Destiny is something you fight for and seize. So, I will fight."

"I see—" Rezelde paused for a breath before asking, "Shindred? What will you do?"

Three pairs of eyes fell upon Shin, who remained with his back turned. The silence did not last very long.

"...I'll do it," Shin answered in a terribly exhausted voice, still facing away from the group. "...Even if I say I don't want to... they're just going to keep targeting us anyway..."

"Then it's decided," Rezelde said, turning on his heel. "First, Shindred's house to recover the weapons. After that—the Divas' base."

It was shortly before noon when Mark started his way home. He had been in front of the Training School for a while, but in the end, the patrol guards had turned him away. Since Mark had been outside the building when the incident occurred, they likely judged there was no need to question him and that it was better for him to leave to avoid adding to the chaos at the scene.

The scene had certainly been chaotic, but according to the information he managed to glean, while there were injuries—some serious—there were fortunately no fatalities. At least, that was the word for the moment. Regardless, hearing that, Mark finally went quietly on his way.

He felt sick. His footing felt strangely unreliable, as if he were stepping on cotton floating on water. He advanced with sluggish steps, but eventually reached the vicinity of his house—and there, his feet stopped.

There were people in front of his house. Three patrol guards. All of them were unfamiliar faces. Their eyes met. Mark began to walk sluggishly again. Eventually, he arrived before the three of them.

"You're Mark Forliber, right?" one of the men in a guard uniform said. "Have Rezelde Gynos Rezizanol and Shindred Kailam come by? We heard they were involved in the incident at the Training School. You were a friend of those two, if I recall."

"Ah... yeah..." Mark answered vaguely, not quite understanding.

"Have they come here?"

"Ah, no... they haven't."

"I see..." The guard exchanged looks with the other two. "—Sorry, but could you come with us? We'd like to hear what you have to say."

"Sure." Following behind the guards as they turned and began to walk, a thought floated hazily into Mark's head.

"...Apparently, one of my friends... was a Diva in disguise..."

The guards stopped at Mark's softly muttered words. "—We'll talk later—"

"I thought we were friends," Mark continued. "Why? Tell me, Ridney. Hey, it's you, isn't it?"

The guards—no, the Divas disguised as guards—froze. "—How—did you know—"

One of them spoke. He was a shabby middle-aged man who looked nothing like 'Ridney,' but he was likely the one who had once been him.

With an expression between crying and laughing, Mark said, "Idiot. I was just bluffing... you're as scatterbrained as ever about that kind of thing, aren't you..."

"If you had an inkling—why did you follow us? Are you not afraid?" another asked.

"I'm scared. Obviously. But... tell me. Why... why would you do that... why did things turn out like this...? Don't give me that 'because I'm a Diva' or 'because you're a Hume' crap. That stuff shouldn't matter. Or was it... a lie? Was everything a lie from the start?"

Even as he spoke, he began to lose track of what he was trying to say. Mark was simply—scared. Not of the Divas. But of the people around him becoming unhappy. Of his friends disappearing.

"Why?! Hey?! Can't a Hume and a Diva be friends? Is whatever you have to do really that important?"

One of them let out a breath. A heavy, heavy sigh. "I don't dislike idealism," he said, slowly shaking his head from side to side. "And I don't dislike men like you." He then

looked straight at Mark. "However—one couldn't exactly call you clever—"

"...Is... no one here...?"

Shin's whispered voice echoed strangely in the vaulted entrance hall. Located on a corner of the city, it was a mansion that wasn't quite a palatial estate, but was far too grand to be called a mere house. This was 'Ridney's' house—the place the Divas had been using as their base.

The four of them had arrived there. Recovering the tools at Shin's house had been anticlimactically easy. They had expected an ambush, but it seemed the Divas had withdrawn quickly after confirming Mei wasn't there. ...Though not before wrecking the roof and walls and leaving the furniture charred. Shin certainly wasn't happy about it, but there was no point complaining. He quickly recovered several tools and distributed them.

Mei took four curse-rings. She wore them like bracelets, two on each wrist. Shin didn't know exactly what they did. Shin himself held the *Law-Breaking Art* sword he had been entrusted with by Rezelde previously—a weapon designed for fighting Divas. It looked like a simple metal cylinder, but by chanting a keyword and tracing the engraved curse-marks while pulling it apart from the center, a blade of light that destroyed only Diva blood would appear. ...However, it caused no harm to anything other than Divas, and as far as Shin's skill went, its reach was short. Still, it was better than nothing.

Among the weapons stocked at the house was a sword Shin had picked up and hidden after a patrol guard dropped it during a previous commotion. It was a rather convenient piece of equipment with a curse-ring that emitted cold air built into the hilt for arresting criminals, but walking around the city with such a thing would undoubtedly lead to his arrest. Regretfully, he left it behind.

Rezelde and Laphra-Lifra carried nothing in particular. According to them, "It's fine."

Regardless, they had come this far prepared for the worst—yet the front door was unlocked, and upon entering, there was no sign of anyone.

"They may have already evacuated," Rezelde said, his eyes scanning the surroundings cautiously. "Since it's been revealed that he was posing as Ridney, both we and the patrol guards would have pinpointed this place as their base immediately. It wouldn't be strange for them to have left."

"So... searching is a waste of time?"

"They shouldn't have had much time. They might have left something behind. Of course,

they might have left nothing at all. We won't know until we look. Let's split into two groups. If we take too long, the patrol guards will arrive. If we run into them, it'll just waste more time."

"Then, Laphra-Lifra will go with Mei," Laphra-Lifra spoke up. Rezelde nodded.

"Understood. Then you two check upstairs. Shindred and I will search the first floor. Call out if anything happens. Also—it seems there are no Divas here now, but they might have anticipated our arrival and set some kind of trap. ...Well, I doubt they had the time for that... but in any case, it's better to be cautious, so please be careful."

Laphra-Lifra nodded and headed toward the stairs leading up from the entrance hall with Mei.

"Shindred, we should go too."

"...Yeah..." Urged on, Shin began searching the first floor with Rezelde.

They moved down the hallway, carefully opening doors and inspecting the rooms. The furnishings were not overly ornate but were of high quality. There were many things to see in terms of interior design, but as for anything left by the Divas, it wasn't going to be found that easily. From the state of the kitchen, they could tell the Divas ate things not much different from Humes, but that wasn't particularly helpful.

"...Doesn't look like there's much here either..." Shin said in a tired voice as they entered yet another room. It was just a bedroom. ...Well, perhaps a weapon was hidden under a pillow. He searched for the time being.

"—By the way, Shindred, there's something I want to ask," Rezelde said while peering into a closet by the wall.

"What is it?" Shin replied, feeling under the mattress.

"Do you like Mei?"

Pfft. Shin actually spat out air. "...Wh... what kind of question is that?!" He stood up instinctively and shouted the retort.

Rezelde didn't stop his hands. "I want to confirm it now. To see if you'll be of use when the time comes."

"—Of use..."

"For example—" Rezelde finally turned his gaze toward Shin, who was looking offended at being treated like a tool. "Let's say a Diva says this: they will do nothing more if you hand over Mei. I want to know what you would do then. If you hated her, you might

agree. In that case, we couldn't fight together. That's why I asked."

"....."

As Shin remained silent, Rezelde continued regardless. "A month ago—you said you couldn't abandon her because she had bitten you. But in truth, that wasn't the only reason you stood up to the Divas, was it?"

"....."

With a bitter expression, Shin began rummaging under the bed again, in the same spot he had just searched. It was true that back then—he had panicked during his first real combat, and as a result, the Diva had injured Mei. That sense of defeat and guilt was a major reason he fought. However, it was hard to honestly say, "This is exactly how it is."

"Whatever the reason may be—" Rezelde continued, seemingly having no intention of pressing further on that point. "What matters is the present. Many of your friends and acquaintances are involved in this case. Indeed, just earlier, though you were confused, you grabbed Mei twice. When push comes to shove, Shindred, will you try to protect her? That is the one thing I must make clear."

Shin continued to pointlessly grope under the bed in silence—

"Shindred—"

"...I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Yeah." Shin finally stopped his hands. Whether he realized the pointlessness or simply got bored, he stopped. "It's not like it's Mei's fault. ...I think. Anyway, the only thing I can say for sure is that those Diva bastards are the problem." His voice sounded like words riding on a long sigh. "If—if the Divas had a good enough reason to take Mei's life, then they should just explain that reason. No—even if it was a reason they couldn't tell others, that doesn't mean... just because we're Humes, it's okay to involve us and kill us! Right!"

"That is correct," came Rezelde's quiet agreement.

"I know that. I know that much. I don't know if Mei is at fault or not. But the ones doing the most unacceptable things are those Diva guys! I know that... but..." In the light and shadow woven by the sun shining through the window, Shin just stared blankly at the carpet. "What is she? What is Mei? Who is she? What did she do? ...Those thoughts... they

just... won't leave my head..."

Rezelde let out a deep sigh.

"—But..." Shin continued. "Earlier, you know—when I grabbed her—both times—for just a second... just for a split second..." He remembered it. That shadow that appeared in Mei's indigo eyes. "She had this... this terribly frightened look in her eyes... I'd never seen her look like that before. And so... I let go." It wasn't because Rezelde or Laphra-Lifra had stopped him. "I just thought, suddenly. She's... she's stupid and childish and has a weird personality and calls me her subordinate... but maybe... she's actually scared too..."

Rezelde said nothing.

Driven to continue—though he didn't know why—Shin went on. "Right now, my head is just a mess. To be blunt, I'm not keen on risking my life to protect Mei. If it comes to a standoff with a Diva, to be honest, I don't know if I can fight. Of course, I'd hate to be killed, but I don't exactly want to slaughter the other side either... When I defeated... no, killed that Diva before... even though I think they were in the wrong for attacking first, honestly, it left a bad taste in my mouth for a while... That said, I'd hate to hand Mei over as a sacrifice... I'm not going to let those Divas, who look down on us and do whatever the hell they want, have their way. ...Uh, basically, what I'm trying to say is..." As he spoke, he lost track of his own point. "I don't want to kill each other, but I'd hate to abandon Mei... I'm just saying what's convenient for me, aren't I..." Eventually, he gave up and scratched the back of his neck.

"Isn't that fine? Wanting what's convenient," Rezelde said, sounding somewhat relieved. "There is no one who doesn't wish for things to be convenient. I am the same. I don't want to trade lives, nor do I want to hand over Mei. But because the Divas are attacking us—because that is unforgivable—we fight. In other words, we are simply choosing the path we can live with—the one convenient for ourselves. ...Moreover, to be honest, I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who said they loved killing. I'm relieved you're not that type."

"...What's that supposed to mean..." Shin gave a small laugh and slowly stood up. Stretching his body, he said, "...Ah. I feel a bit better. ...It's weird, since nothing's actually been solved." Just venting the gloom had made him much lighter. He wondered if Rezelde had planned that. "Sorry about that. For being so indecisive. Well, I might end up like that again... but anyway, we can't just let those Divas run wild. That much is certain."

"—Indeed."

"Right... let's go to the next room. Doesn't look like there's anything here."

Did Shin notice that the heavy expression had vanished from his face? The two left the bedroom and searched a few more rooms—and finally, behind one door, there was not a room, but a staircase leading down, swallowed by darkness. The air rising up was cold. It smelled of damp, old wood.

"...A basement, huh..." Shin muttered. Many houses had basements for storage or for keeping wine. Shin's house didn't have one. "These are the kinds of places where you'd expect to find something suspicious."

"Is that a common expectation?"

"...Don't you read any entertainment books?"

Shin found a curse-ring near the entrance and traced it with his fingertip. The engraved curse-marks reacted to the magical power of a human, activating the *Law-Breaking Art*. The effect, needless to say, was light. A curse-ring paired with the one he traced was embedded in the ceiling, and a white light appeared there. The darkness, which had seemed to lead into an abyss, revealed the face of an unremarkable, dilapidated staircase as soon as it was exposed to the light. Beyond it was a hallway. It seemed there were several rooms in the basement as well.

They glanced at each other—and began to descend. The creaking of the stairs was strangely grating. Was it because it was underground? Regardless, it was oddly chilly. The mortar floor—once beige, now looking only like a dull white—was terribly damp.

A row of several doors. Behind the first was darkness. Tracing the curse-ring on the wall, a pile of junk appeared under the light. Behind the second—

"—Mei! Laphra-Lifra! Come here! To the basement!" Rezelde shouted.

On the second floor, there was nothing but a row of unremarkable rooms. Perhaps they were once someone's rooms, now used for guests. There were several similar rooms with nothing but a bed, a shelf, and a small table. The two had searched them briefly, but it didn't seem likely anything would be in a place like this.

"Hey, Raph-Riff~" Mei said, perhaps bored, tired, or just enjoying the fluffiness, as she lay face down on the bed, kicking her legs back and forth.

"It is Laphra-Lifra," the girl corrected. From her position, she couldn't see Mei's expression well.

"...What do you think... of Subordinate Number Two~?"

"He is no good," Laphra-Lifra declared instantly. "He has no loyalty to Mei. Surely, he is aiming for the position of leader." She said this with a straight face—something that, if Shin were present, would have prompted a retort from every possible angle.

Mei buried her face in the pillow. "...I wonder if he hates me..."

"It is okay. You just need to show more of your leader-like qualities, Mei."

"...Leader-like qualities...?"

"Giving food. Taking him for walks."

Mei had no memories of her past. She wasn't even sure what or how much she had forgotten, and there were many things about customs and daily life she didn't quite understand. Yet, even for Mei, she felt Laphra-Lifra's current advice was a bit off.

"...He was really mad... Subordinate Number Two..." she whispered, biting her lip slightly, still buried in the pillow.

"Mei is not at fault." When Laphra-Lifra said that, Mei wondered why it made her feel even more uneasy. "...Nn..." She groaned pointlessly—

"—Mei! Laphra-Lifra! Come here! To the basement!" Rezelde's voice echoed from afar.

Shin heard footsteps approaching from behind, but he couldn't turn around or take his eyes off the sight before him.

"This way," came Rezelde's voice. The two sets of footsteps and presences arrived at Shin's side—

Hiee—The sound of someone catching their breath—was it Mei?

This place was likely originally a wine cellar or something similar. Further back, he could see barrels and shelves. There was no way to be sure. It didn't matter, and besides, they couldn't reach the area with the barrels and shelves. They were blocked by a wall of ice right in front of them.

It was only natural the air was cold. Most of the room was filled with ice, likely created by *Law-Breaking Art*. Frozen within it were the barrels, the shelves—and several humans.

Ridney was there. The female driver was there. The old man who had been with Ridney on the first day was there. There were men he didn't know, women he didn't know, a

young man he didn't know, and a middle-aged man he didn't know. They were all in their underwear, frozen within the thick, thick ice as if they were standing and sleeping.

Naturally—there was no way they were alive.

Shin suddenly thought of something. Before he entered the Training School. The school he attended as a child. The specimen room in a corner of that school. The countless corpses sleeping in a tiny, tiny sea of formalin.

"It seems these were the 'models' the Divas used for their Transformation *Law-Breaking Art*," Rezelde's voice echoed from somewhere far away. "The face of the patrol guard who attacked me is here, too. The Divas probably gathered people from all over to use as samples for changing their appearance. 'Ridney' was also supposed to be a distant relative of the owner of this mansion... but in reality, he was likely just someone kidnapped to fit the 'background story' created for infiltrating the Training School."

Thump. Shin was bumped by something and staggered, coming back to his senses. He almost fell but managed to brace himself. When he looked, the person clinging to him was—

"—Mei?"

She didn't answer. She hugged Shin with both hands, gripping his clothes. With her face buried in Shin's chest, her shoulders were shaking violently—

Hic— hic— hic— The sounds she made were less like cries of terror and more like the gasping breath of some nasty seizure.

"Hey?! Mei?!"

"Mei!"

"—! Let's get her away from here! Outside!"

The three of them dragged the frozen Mei away—

"Seriously, I don't know what's what anymore."

Once they had left the basement and gone outside the mansion, the seizure or whatever it was subsided quickly, and Mei spoke in her usual nonchalant tone. However, she wasn't quite her usual self. There were faint traces of exhaustion in her eyes and voice. Her hair ornaments seemed to hang lifelessly—though that was probably just Shin

overthinking it.

The group moved to a vacant lot a short distance from the mansion. Low weeds covered the ground like a lawn, and the hedges and garden trees of another house nearby provided shade. If they looked toward the street, the mansion they had been in was visible nearby. It was that kind of place.

"I'm sorry," Rezelde said. "I didn't expect Mei to be so shocked."

"Nn." Mei tilted her head as if trying to remember something. "I don't think it was like that."

"Then what was it like?"

Asked by Shin, she tilted her head again. "It was like... I'd seen it before, or was about to remember it. And then my head just started spinning."

"Remember? You mean your memories might be coming back?"

"Not quite. In the end, I didn't remember anything." She didn't look the least bit disappointed.

However, it seemed that because of the current commotion, both Shin and Mei had completely forgotten about their previous tension.

"So... are you okay now?"

"Nn." She grinned, showing her white teeth.

"...In the end, all we found out... was that those guys didn't give a damn about human lives from the very beginning..." Shin muttered gloomily.

"However, if they've already abandoned their base, the problem is how they will move next," Rezelde spoke up. "They must be looking for us too, so in the worst-case scenario, they might show up just by us walking openly on the main street... but it's certain that finding them first would give us more options. How to move, how to fight. The standard tactic would be to defeat them individually when they are dispersed, just as they tried to do to us... but I don't think they will act separately."

"But their hideout is gone now... that's gotta make things harder for them, for sure."

"A beast driven from its territory," it was Laphra-Lifra who said this, speaking as if reciting a poem, in response to Shin's hopeful opinion. "Will seek its next territory. Even by taking it."

Shin and Rezelde looked at each other.

"I see—" Rezelde's gaze turned toward—though it was hidden by the neighboring hedge—the mansion the Divas had used. "The Divas killed the residents of that mansion and impersonated them. Even if they are driven from that house, they will just do the same thing somewhere else. That's what you mean."

"Then there's no point!"

"The Divas will probably procure their next base. Once they do... what will they do after that...?" Rezelde murmured to himself, ignoring Shin's angry voice. "They will likely think of smoking us out too. They'll go after places that could serve as our base. However, they've already attacked my dormitory and Shindred's house. They won't think we'll just casually return to those places. So, where would they set their sights...?"

Gasp! Rezelde snapped his head up. "Shindred!"

"—What is it?"

"Next, they'll probably target Mark!"

Mark Forliber's house was halfway between the Training School and the hill where the City Head's official residence was located.

—It would be more accurate to call it what *was* his house.

When Shin and the others arrived, what had been Mark's house was riddled with holes, just like Shin's house. The area was swarming with onlookers. Several patrol guards were running back and forth, organizing the people and conducting the investigation.

"...What the hell... is this..." Can I do nothing but stand here like an idiot, being stunned? Shin thought hazily as he began to walk again. Toward Mark's house—through the crowd.

"—Hey!" One of the patrol guards who noticed them raised a voice of reproach. He looked as if he didn't want any more onlookers. "There's been an accident! It's dangerous, so don't come near!"

He couldn't just say, "Okay." They were involved parties. Shin opened his mouth—

"Diva."

The word echoed, and everyone froze. It wasn't Shin who said it. It was Mei, who was walking diagonally behind him.

"...Wh...?" Shin looked back over his shoulder, a confused sound escaping him. Mei

looked back into his eyes.

"That's why. You said to tell you right away. I'm telling you right away. So." She pointed directly. At the patrol guard who had issued the warning to them. "That person is a Diva."

...Murmur...

The crowd buzzed. Normally, of course, it would have been dismissed as nonsense. But in the current situation, where all sorts of rumors, true and false, were flying around, it was different. Eyes gathered on the patrol guard. The guard tried to say something—and could say nothing—

"And."

Mei traced the bracelet-like thing on her right hand—the curse-ring she had prepared previously—with her left hand, as if spinning it.

At the same time, heat pressed down from the sky. A mass of flames that suddenly descended from above was supposed to swallow the four of them and scorch the road.

However. At the tip of Mei's raised right hand, the crimson flames were reduced to blue atmosphere.

Mei then held up one index finger. "Over there, two more."

An obvious sense of agitation was at the place Mei pointed to.

"!?" Shin snapped his head up. Following his movement, several of the onlookers did as well.

On the high roof of a clothing store. Above, there were two shadows with wings on their backs.

Screams rose from among the onlookers. A panic broke out.

What was that? What was that girl?

A chill clung to the back of Cezenol, who was hiding on the roof. It was, of course, none other than the target, the young girl named Mei.

The trap to intercept them was set.

He had ultimately decided against the initial plan of approaching them in the form of the classmate named Mark. Through conversation, he had realized that Kilkelius, who played the role of 'Ridney,' did not have a sufficient grasp of the man named Mark. In

that case, there was a risk of their identity being discovered through their manner of speaking, and the plan being turned against them.

Therefore, they decided to destroy Mark's house, which the targets might use as a hideout, and set a net there. Kilkelius would approach disguised as a patrol guard. He would launch a surprise attack from point-blank range to take out one of them—ideally the target. At the moment the attention of the targets was on Kilkelius, Cezenol and Lugria, who were waiting on the roof, would attack from above. They would aim for total annihilation or the assassination of the target. Kilkelius would withdraw at this point. If, even then, they failed to finish the target, the enemy's numbers should be reduced. They would then join up with Kilkelius, who had withdrawn and returned to his true Diva form, and settle things using their numerical advantage. That was the plan.

Cezenol was now clad in armor and weapons. His weapons were two short swords—by Hume standards, that is; in his hands, they looked like large daggers.

There should have been no problem with Kilkelius's transformation. He had dragged a patrol guard who was slacking off nearby into the shadows, snapped his neck, and borrowed his clothes and appearance. Neither the onlookers at the scene nor the other patrol guards should have had any doubts or sensed anything amiss with Kilkelius.

After waiting for a while, he saw from the roof the four targets approaching. Two Humes. The red-haired girl—the target named Mei—and a black-haired man. He believed his name was Shindred. He had heard the man's swordsmanship wasn't bad, but he didn't seem to have such a weapon now. One was a Dragno. Caution required. And—one more. He didn't know this one. She looked like a Hume woman, but her aura was different.

Regardless, that was no reason to cancel the operation. As planned, Kilkelius, disguised as a patrol guard, pretended to stop them—

However. Before they even got close, the target identified the patrol guard disguised as Kilkelius as a Diva at a single glance.

What was the meaning of this?

He had heard that Lugria, who was disguised as a female driver, had her identity seen through. However, he had thought that was likely because Lugria had said something careless, and the enemy had guessed her identity and bluffed. That was what Cezenol thought. But this was different. Clearly.

However, he couldn't let panic ruin everything. Although it was different from the plan,

Cezenol instantly wove a curse-incantation in a low voice and sent a mass of flames falling. It was then that the target nonchalantly raised one hand.

No way. Before Cezenol's eyes, the flames were extinguished. She seemed to be using some kind of curse-ring—but that didn't matter. The fact was—the target was no ordinary person.

—Should we withdraw for now?— For a moment, such a thought crossed his mind.

But what would a temporary retreat achieve? If their true identity was seen through without question, there was no point in changing form. Furthermore, if they didn't know the enemy's power, they couldn't plan their next move. So, how could they learn the enemy's power? In the end, they had to fight.

The target pointed here and said something, and the people around also looked up—The onlookers screamed. As they began to flee in panic—

"We're attacking. Lugria."

"Yes." By the time Lugria answered his call, Cezenol had already leaped into the air.

He wove a curse-incantation while gliding down on his wings. The wind shook his cheeks. He intended to make flames appear in the center of the four targets. The red-haired girl nonchalantly moved her raised right hand behind her. She seemed to have said something, but it didn't reach Cezenol's ears.

And Cezenol's *Law-Breaking Art*—did not activate. Had he failed to pronounce the curse-incantation accurately because of the wind on his cheeks? ...Or was it possible—that the activation itself had been prevented?

The ground approached before he could find an answer. Catching the red-haired target in his sight, Cezenol drew his two short swords.

One of the Divas dove toward Mei. Two pieces of steel appeared in his hands. The other one—the female Diva—let out a sound that would only sound like a beast's roar to a human ear. An offensive-type *Law-Breaking Art*. Was it a two-pronged attack on Mei? Or a diversion for the others?

However, before the Diva could swing his sword or release the *Law-Breaking Art*—Mei disappeared. The Divas hurriedly aborted their attacks and changed their flight paths. They turned like water birds and stayed fluttering in the sky.

Mei was at the corner of the road, held in the arms of Laphra-Lifra. The moment the Diva dove toward Mei, Laphra-Lifra had kicked off the ground in a sideways leap and

snatched Mei from the spot. It was an explosive speed incomparable to a Hume. For the Diva who saw it up close, he could likely only catch an afterimage.

"Mei, please stay here," Laphra-Lifra said, her profile still glaring at the Divas—a red, tattoo-like pattern appeared on her cheek. Not just her cheek. Also on the exposed parts of her arms and legs. Likely only Mei understood that the patterns appearing all over her body with the surge of emotion were a collection of small curse-marks.

Leaving those words, Laphra-Lifra jumped. From the ground to a nearby streetlight. She kicked and dented the streetlight—and went toward the female Diva who had no sword.

The female Diva—Lugria's—reaction was not in time. She hadn't expected to be targeted. Furthermore, the enemy's jumping power and speed were beyond her expectations. Before she could brace herself, Lugria was hit by the blonde woman's body slam. Her leather armor mitigated the impact somewhat, but that was all. While coughing out the air in her lungs from the impact, Lugria still flapped her wings desperately. —It was a futile resistance, though.

She was slammed into the wall of the second floor of the building behind her. Sandwiched between the woman and the wall, her breath was blocked and her internal organs groaned. Before her eyes were the eyes of the woman, filled with fighting spirit. Red patterns running over her skin. Lugria managed to strike a knee into the woman's stomach. The sensation was like kicking a thick mass of rubber. She didn't feel it had worked.

She fell just like that. To the ground below. She somehow managed to break her fall. She stood up as if bouncing. After a pause, the woman was there. —A woman—well, she was a woman, certainly. However, that opponent could no longer be called 'looks like a Hume.' The color of her skin and the red patterns on it faded and disappeared, being covered by golden animal fur growing all over her body.

This was likely the one who had sent a murderous intent toward her from the roof when she visited the target's house. Lugria finally realized the enemy's true identity. —Spirit-Possessed Tribe— Her loose, unfamiliar clothes were designed for transformation.

Before their eyes, the woman's form—her arms, her legs, her face—transformed into a demi-beast. —I won't let you— She released an offensive *Law-Breaking Art*. By the time she released it, the Rewarder woman had jumped to the side. It seemed there was no

such thing as an opening during transformation. While moving around, her form changed—

"—A wolf—" Lugria whispered, feeling a cold sweat on her back.

Awoooooooooooooooooon! The howl of the woman, who had now completely transformed into a demi-beast, echoed through the afternoon Burgess City.

Cezenol did not support Lugria. The target was separated by being held by the blonde woman, and that blonde woman had attacked Lugria. He saw this as an opportunity. The target was alone in a distant place. Given that she was helped by the blonde woman, she might be poor at close-quarters combat.

So, now. If he finished the target with his weapons, it would all be over. Whether it was the Dragno or the Hume, they weren't in a place where they could support her in time. He moved simultaneously with his decision. In this positional relationship, running would provide more explosive power. He landed, kicked the ground, and closed the distance with the target in one go.

Behind him, he sensed the agitation of the Hume and the Dragno. They couldn't release *Law-Breaking Art*. If he dodged, it would hit the target. Before him was the target, standing still. Hearing the sound of Lugria and the blonde woman hitting the wall and falling, Cezenol was certain of victory.

—Interference came from an unexpected place. Something crossed in front of him. Pain in his supporting leg. He lost his balance and stumbled.

The target, who had come back to her senses, ran. He sensed the Hume and the Dragno rushing toward him. Both sides joined up. The opportunity was lost.

But who on earth—He looked back. Beyond him were the fleeing people—and several patrol guards with their swords drawn. —Come to think of it, there were people like this here, too— Cezenol whispered bitterly in his heart.

Of course, they had been around from the beginning, but because they had fled with the onlookers, been trampled in the commotion, or just stayed and were hovering around from a distance, Cezenol had completely lost sight of them as a hostile force. Some of those patrol guards who had managed to stay on the scene had squeezed out their meager courage and released cold *Law-Breaking Art* with the curse-rings on their swords. They only had fear and a sense of duty. It was no wonder he couldn't sense any murderous intent. One of those shots happened to catch Cezenol's leg. It was through his clothes, but it was cold enough to be painful. It might result in a light frostbite.

UooooooooOooooo.....

Cezenol wove a curse-incantation to sweep away the redundant small frys—then stopped, switching to a different one.

The new incantation, sounding like a short groan, manifested a shield of darkness at the tip of his outstretched right hand. The released light collided with the darkness; the two melted into one another and vanished like the wind.

It was a *Law-Breaking Art* unleashed by the Dragno. Seeing Cezenol targeting the patrol guards as an opening, he had made his move.

There had been the option of wiping out the guards with a spell while evading the Dragno's attack, but Cezenol's right leg had just been struck by cold air. Judging that he might lack the explosive power to dodge and thus take a direct hit, he had switched his spell to defense.

"—Why—" Cezenol said, casting his gaze forward. "Why side with that woman? Dragno."

"—Why—" the Dragno asked back, staring straight into his eyes as if shielding the target behind him. "Do you target her?"

—I see.—

Does he move only on orders, ignorant of the reason? Or is it a reason he cannot speak even if he knows? In the end, he is likely the same as us—

Cezenol interpreted it as such on his own. If that were the case, it was simple. They would fight until the victor imposed his will. Slowly, Cezenol turned to fully face the Dragno.

Fear resided in Shin's chest. It was not fear of the fight, nor fear of the Divas.

Laphra-Lifra had pounced on the female Diva, and the dual-wielding Diva had closed in on Mei. In that instant, images of the past resurrected in Shin's mind.

The Diva slipping past his side. Mei's stomach being slashed by talons. It was what happened when the Diva calling himself Kelmizo had attacked Mei before.

At that time, Mei had nearly died. She nearly died—and somehow survived. But there

was no guarantee she would be saved this time.

Shin ran toward Mei. He knew his timing wouldn't make it. Whether she was terrified or simply dazed, Mei wasn't moving. Time felt agonizingly slow. The Diva moved slowly toward Mei—and his own body moved even more sluggishly than that—

Then, something tearing through the air snapped Shin's time back to normal. The Diva stumbled. Mei started to move.

Looking over, he saw the patrol guards with their swords leveled. —*Oh right, those guys were here too.*— Thinking such ungrateful thoughts in the corner of his mind, he took the hand of the running Mei and pulled her close.

"Mmph." Mei bumped her face into Shin's chest from the momentum. "That kind of hurt."

"Are you okay!?"

"More or less~" Mei looked up and forced a grin.

Between the two of them and the Diva stood Rezelde. After unleashing an attack that was blocked, he spoke briefly with the Diva while giving a small wave with his hand behind his back.

He was telling them to take Mei to a safe place while he could. But was that really the best move? Rather, shouldn't all four of them—

Just as Shin hesitated: *Dodododododoon!*

A series of small explosions swallowed the figures and screams of the patrol guards. It wasn't the work of the Diva facing Rezelde. As the smoke covered the area, a figure slowly stepped out from within—

A Diva with red hair and five short horns. Likely one of the ones who had been disguised as a patrol guard earlier. He had returned to his true form, and for some reason, his upper body was bare. In one hand, he held a standard-issue patrol guard sword.

—It seemed running was no longer an option.

Splitting their forces was dangerous. It was the absolute most basic rule of combat he had learned at the Training School. If Shin tried to flee with Mei, the five-horned one would simply move to reinforce his comrades. If that happened, either Rezelde or

Laphra-Lifra would break first, and the other would fall under the combined assault of three Divas. After that, the three of them would corner Shin and Mei together.

While glaring at the red-haired Diva, Shin pulled a metal cylinder from the back of his waist. Gripping it with both hands and tracing the engraved spiral band with his fingertips, he muttered the keyword for activation.

"—Align the height of Vata and the height of Terror to the spiral; become the blade of light that destroys the Diva—"

Deep inside the cold metal cylinder in his hands, a vibration was born. Shin pulled the cylinder apart to the left and right. Light erupted from both sides. They were only about the size of a palm, but they were blades of light that brought ruin to Diva blood.

It was the *Law-Breaking Art* sword he had been entrusted with by Rezelde.

Seeing it, the red-haired Diva stopped for a moment—then a sneer surfaced on his lips. Advancing toward Shin and the others again, the red-haired Diva spoke.

"That's a... pretty pathetic weapon you've got there, Shin."

The voice was different, but—

"...Ridney?"

"My real name... well, whatever." The Diva said. It seemed he had no intention of telling him.

"Yeah. Whatever," Shin said. "Fake Ridney is good enough."

He saw the Diva's cheek twitch slightly. Shin continued regardless. "But man... you've got a pretty scary face now that you're in your 'true form.' So, I want to ask—is your swordsmanship still as crappy in that form as it used to be?"

To be honest, Shin didn't quite know why he was being so provocative. Perhaps it was anger at being deceived and having his classmates hurt. Or perhaps it was to keep the enemy from targeting Mei.

Regardless—

"...Shin... you really piss me off." The enemy took the bait. His eyes narrowed into slits. "A mere Hume acting like that."

"Oh, boy. I'm sure I'm no match for a Great Diva," Shin said mockingly. "After all, since you couldn't beat a mere Hume with a sword, you'd probably just wimp out and attack with *Law-Breaking Art* from the sky, and there'd be nothing I could do then."

"...That's a pretty transparent provocation."

"Is it?" Having his intent called out, Shin nevertheless let a smirk surface. "Isn't it a fact that without your spells and flight, you can't beat me? Oh, I see. Among Divas, you call simply stating the truth a 'provocation.' Ah—yeah, you're right, it's a provocation. As long as you have flight and *Law-Breaking Art*, I can't beat the 'Distinguished Diva Professor.'"

"Shiiiiiiiiiiin."

The corners of the Diva's mouth curled up into a smile. It was a very strained smile, though. "You really are annoying. So, is that it? You want to be beaten down, have your limbs snapped... and watch your woman get carved to death before I finish you off... Is that what you're saying?"

He swung his sword with a *fwoosh*, cutting the air. "Fine. I'll take you up on that provocation."

"You're pretty confident, aren't you? —Mei, don't interfere. Go somewhere else."

Taking a step forward, Shin spoke. Even if his provocation was working, if Mei joined in, the enemy wouldn't hesitate to use flight and spells. If that happened, the battle would move beyond Shin's reach.

Holding the twin-bladed *Law-Breaking Art* sword, Shin closed the distance with his opponent.

Laphra-Lifra was drunk on a sense of exhilaration. It had been a long time since she had returned to this form.

—Returned—though this wasn't necessarily her "true" form. Usually, she took a Hume appearance; otherwise, things could be quite inconvenient. But it was true that when she took this form, she felt as if she had become—or rather, returned to—her true self.

An enemy was before her. An opponent to be defeated. Destroy them. That was the

reason for her existence.

She kicked off the ground toward the female Diva. The opponent groaned in a panic. An offensive-type *Law-Breaking Art*. In an instant, Laphra-Lifra read the information. She felt as if she could 'see' exactly where the spell was being aimed.

The moment she kicked off for her next step with her right leg, she shifted her center of gravity slightly and applied force. That alone changed her path to the left. A smudge emerged in the void to her right. The female Diva must have used some spell—but it was none of her business. A miss was nothing but a miss.

Applying force to her left foot this time, she headed toward the female Diva. Flapping her wings in a panic, the Diva kicked the ground, trying to escape into the sky.

—*How futile.*—

Exposing fangs in a smile at the corner of her mouth, Laphra-Lifra leaped. The speed of her leap exceeded the speed of the flight.

Realizing this, the female Diva thrust out with talons covered in steel gauntlets. But from Laphra-Lifra's perspective, it was slow—not so slow as to be effortless, but nothing she would praise.

She parried the right thrust with her left hand and snatched the wrist. Pulling the Diva in—the female Diva's left hand entered the corner of her vision, aiming for her solar plexus. Weak. This time, she parried with her right hand, pressing down from above. Now she had both hands.

Up close, the female Diva's cheeks looked unexpectedly soft. Laphra-Lifra opened her mouth wide—

The sound the female Diva let out sounded like a scream of terror. However: *Zubaan!*

An impact struck Laphra-Lifra's stomach. The female Diva had blasted a *Law-Breaking Art*. And of all places, right between Laphra-Lifra and herself.

Pain and impact. But even that felt pleasant to Laphra-Lifra now. Using the momentum of the exploding spell as recoil, she tucked her chin and slammed a headbutt into the female Diva's forehead.

She might have been a bit too enthusiastic. The impact became a far-too-pleasant

sound, shaking skulls, eardrums, and brains, and the two fell to the earth together.

Rezelde was in the middle of a pessimistic train of thought. He didn't think a Dragno was inferior to a Diva. If they fought, they should be evenly matched. But that was only if both fought under similar conditions.

Currently, Rezelde's power was severely limited. Because of his long-term study abroad, several mages had spent hours transforming him into this shape so as not to burden his body. He could not return to his original form by his own will and power alone.

While his physical strength and resistance remained unchanged, with his wings and tail gone, he naturally couldn't fly or strike his opponent with his tail. He even felt his ability to manipulate *Law-Breaking Arts* had diminished.

In fact, even when he had struck 'Ridney' from the side while still wearing Mark's appearance at the Training School: it was only because Ridney tried to use a spell that Rezelde had first gained confirmation of which Diva had changed into whom. But he couldn't let Shin be killed. He had instantly unleashed an offensive spell at Ridney—but because he had no time, the incantation was incomplete. He knew the power would inevitably drop, and the opponent was a Diva. Even so, it hadn't worked. They looked like they were in some pain, but that was it. He had hoped to at least inflict a wound...

During the previous Diva attack, it had taken Shin, Mei, Rezelde, and the patrol guards combined to finally take down just one. Now there were three of those Divas. It was a bit of a disadvantage for one-on-one combat.

However, to go back on his word now and run away with his tail between his legs would drag not only his own pride but the pride of the Golden Scale Clan into the dirt. That he could not do. Then, he had no choice but to try.

He faced the dual-wielding Diva. He waved his hand behind him, signaling Shin and Mei to leave. If the Diva's attention turned to them, he might be able to strike an opening—

Dodododododoon!

In the corner of his vision, he saw a series of small explosions swallow the patrol guards. It seemed the Diva disguised as a guard had undone his transformation and returned. The one facing him was, naturally, Shin.

Plan One: Self-destruction.

It couldn't be helped. He didn't want to do this, but—

Kuooooooooooooooooo!

Rezelde converted the air in his lungs into a curse-incantation and exhaled. The incantation created a spear of light, which he unleashed toward the dual-wielding Diva.

The Diva didn't even flinch, scattering it with a shield of *Law-Breaking Art*. It was within Rezelde's expectations, of course. By then, Rezelde was already charging toward the Diva, following the spear of light he had released.

"—Barehanded—" the Diva swung one of his swords. His figure grew larger in Rezelde's vision. "—What do you plan to do—"

The sound of a blade cutting the wind. Rezelde held up his arm and took another step forward. *Gotsu!* A dull, hard sound. Pain in his left arm.

Ignoring it, Rezelde manifested a fire *Law-Breaking Art* toward the Diva's stomach from point-blank range. The flames pressed against the atmosphere and erupted. It hit. But it was far from a fatal wound. Half pushed by the flames, half by his own will, the Diva leaped far back. Chasing him, Rezelde wove his next incantation as he ran.

The Diva thrust with his left sword even while retreating. He didn't feel like taking this hit, so Rezelde was forced to stop and release a spell. This time, it was blocked.

The Diva, having taken distance, directed his gaze toward Rezelde's left arm. The spot where he had just intercepted the sword. His clothes and shirt were torn, and the skin beneath—it was likely slightly red. Transformation spells didn't change physical durability.

The middle name of the proud Golden Scale and Golden Wing was not for show. He could manage to block a short sword blade—provided he shifted the point of impact to kill the momentum—even if it was wielded by a Diva. He hadn't wanted to do it much, since his prized scales, currently transformed into skin, might be damaged.

—However—

"...I see..." He heard the Diva murmur. It was a fact that his hand had now been read. "Strong against fire and tough skin. Neither fire spells nor half-hearted sword strikes

will work."

The Diva pointed the tip of the sword in his right hand at Rezelde. He didn't know what he intended to do, but he had no obligation to watch quietly. Moving sideways, Rezelde unleashed an offensive spell at the Diva.

But the opponent didn't panic; he evaded the strike with a light side-step and exhaled an incantation that sounded like a thin breath. A yellow, glowing band of curse-energy coiled around the blade—and stayed on the steel without vanishing. Then the left. This one was a black band.

"In that case," the Diva said, holding the two swords wrapped in energy. "How about sword strikes imbued with lightning to paralyze the nerves and cold to slow your movements?"

It seemed that for Rezelde, things were not going to proceed in a very pleasant direction.

Shin ran at the moment the Diva folded the wings on his back. He tried to dive into the opponent's chest in one go, staying low to the ground.

He sensed the wind above his head. He jumped to the side. A silver afterimage slashed the corner of his vision; the howl of the wind was heard only after. He had barely evaded the enemy's sword strike.

As he ran past the Diva's side, he slashed with the blade in his left hand. A miss. The enemy had dodged by a hair.

As he passed, he forced his body to twist and reverse. He stepped in and thrust. The opponent was not so kind as to simply accept the unfamiliar short sword of light. He turned and dodged, sweeping his sword along the ground to take distance.

The two then glared at each other. The opponent was indeed practiced with a sword, unlike 'Ridney' when he held a practice sword in class. Furthermore, despite growing taller and lankier, his speed remained the same. In terms of pure speed, he exceeded the Kelmizo he had fought before.

Moreover, his tactics were properly adapted to Shin's weapon. In other words—he wouldn't let Shin get close.

For Shin, who had a short reach, to win, he needed to dive into the opponent's chest. Close the distance, pressure him with a flurry of strikes—and land a hit when an opening appeared.

But this *Law-Breaking Art* sword had a very large advantage-slash-disadvantage as a close-quarters weapon. Namely—it could not clash blades with the opponent's sword.

The blade of light passed through normal objects. Like a ghost with no substance. It only harmed the flesh of a Diva. This meant that if used well, one could ignore the opponent's defense—but conversely, it meant one could not block the opponent's attacks.

If it were a normal dagger, it could be used to force one's way into the enemy's chest and block their sword. But with a blade of light that had no substance, that was an impossible request. If he charged recklessly, at best it would be a mutual kill.

Perhaps out of caution, the other side didn't seem able to strike carelessly either. The two glared at each other in silence.

Could three Divas alone crush the city of Burgess? If comparing pure military power, the answer was no.

Divas were certainly strong. They could fly and use powerful offensive *Law-Breaking Art* without the aid of tools. In the war fifty years ago, there were many stories of Hume units being wiped out by a single Diva without a chance to fight back.

But now, the times and the situation were different. In the previous war, the offensive curse-rings deployed to Hume units were inferior goods that might not even activate. In contrast, the manufacturing precision of curse-rings had improved, and even the swords held by ordinary patrol guards were standard-equipped with rings that emitted cold air.

These were intended to sap the opponent's body temperature and mobility for arrest; their lethal capacity was extremely low. Of course, being hit by such a thing once wouldn't kill a Diva, a Hume... or even a small animal.

However—it was a fact for both Humes and Divas that if your body temperature dropped, your movements slowed. And if you were hit over and over and over again, you couldn't avoid freezing to death.

Even if the Divas released wide-range offensive spells from the sky, the patrol guards had defensive equipment. They couldn't completely negate the attack, but they could—likely—reduce the damage. No one had ever tried it against a Diva, though.

In addition, there were soldiers. The numbers were greatly reduced, but they had more powerful offensive curse-rings and even tanks, albeit old models. Ultimately, a Diva's stamina and willpower were not infinite. If they fought a proper battle, three Divas should have no chance of winning.

That was, assuming they fought a proper battle.

However, when information and people's psychology became involved, things became complicated. Yes, like in Burgess City now.

People called "villains" exist in any era and any place. Naturally, the current city was no exception. As rumors of Divas and the accompanying chaos spread, it was only natural that groups trying to exploit the situation would emerge.

Theft, arson, and in some cases, murder. And if it seemed like there would be a commotion, they could just shout this and run away:

"—It's a Diva! A Diva appeared!"

With just that, the Diva would take the fall for the crimes they had committed. ...Setting aside whether it would actually go that smoothly, it was a fact that many fools thought it would work and put it into practice.

Fires. Thefts. Robberies. Comotions broke out all over the city, and various rumors flew. A Diva appeared on Third Street. No, near the City Head's official residence. He jumped onto the roof of a carriage. He was buying a ticket at the station.

From rumors that were clearly lies to stories that were hard to tell if true or false. It spread from every corner of the city, and as a result, both the military and the patrol guards were forced to rush about in a state where they had no coordination at all.

What a patrol guard saw after rushing to a report from a good citizen who had heard a Diva's groan was a pet bird that had escaped from somewhere, chirping in a shed. A panty thief surrounded by patrol guards and a tank confessed while hanging his head that he had intended to blame it on a Diva. There were even reports that a disliked neighbor was a Diva in disguise.

In other words—even if a Diva truly appeared, there was no way for those in other

places to verify the truth of the information other than by actually going to the scene.

A Diva appeared halfway between the Training School and the City Head's official residence. Such information was also lost among the many rumors.

The thoughts of the patrol guards and soldiers who heard the information were all the same: —*Again?*— In some cases, it might have been ignored.

The one reason it didn't end that way was that the location of the rumor was relatively close to the City Head's official residence. Near the official residence were four of the only ten tanks in the city and a unit of patrol guards.

—*We don't know the purpose of the Diva's attack. But if it's terrorism, there's a high possibility the official residence will be targeted.*— That was the reason the unit was there. ...Of course, the fact that it was an order from the City Head played a large part.

In any case, as rumors that couldn't even be called information were brought in, a part of the unit began to move. One tank and about a dozen patrol guards.

It wasn't that they believed the rumors, but if they were true and they did nothing and allowed the Diva to get close to the official residence—how would the City Head, who was famous for being weak to the strong and strong to the weak, behave afterward?

Well, there weren't many oddballs who wished for their own dismissal or salary cut. It wouldn't hurt to at least show a willing attitude for form's sake. That's what it was.

It wasn't that far away. They could just think of it as a walk for a change of pace. The members who set out only thought of it that way. But unfortunately for them—they hit the jackpot.

Everyone stood there aghast. Two, or perhaps three, Divas attacking the Training School. That's what they had heard.

The battle unfolding before them. The people there. One was a red-haired girl. A civilian who had failed to escape? Her behavior was strange for that, though. One was a black-haired young man. He held a glowing stick and was glaring at the opponent in front of him.

Well, these two were fine.

But there were three monstrous beings with black wings who looked like absolute villains. A golden half-beast, half-human who looked like he'd attack people. Someone

who looked very similar to a Hume but was different, looking like he'd be pulling strings from behind.

Someone whispered, and someone answered. "...So, which one is the Diva...?"

"I don't know..."

What is the scariest thing in the world? There would be many answers. And among those many answers, there is this:

A fool with power beyond their station.

For example—a tank commander who has no combat experience or real ability, has reached his position only through social maneuvering, and is now panicking upon encountering an enemy in his first real combat.

The moment he spotted a non-human figure through the peephole, the phrase "situational judgment" vanished from the commander's head. The rumors of Divas he had heard up until then were resurrected.

In a previous attack, the *Law-Breaking Art* released by the guards was said to have had no effect at all, and hundreds of patrol guards were killed. In the current case as well, he had heard the Training School where the Diva went on a rampage was completely destroyed, and most of the students were sacrificed.

At that time, what was in the commander's head was not how much the rumors had been exaggerated, but only this phrase: —*Kill or be killed.*—

"N-Number one, prepare to fire!"

At the command issued from inside the iron casing, the subordinate soldiers moved with a spinal reflex. They, too, had heard similar rumors.

"N-Number one, preparing to fire!"

The gunner repeated the command as trained, rotated the revolver of the gun barrel, and set it to the position called "Number One."

Although called a gun, it was essentially a high-power offensive *Law-Breaking Art*. Curse-mark formulas were densely engraved inside the barrel, and by rotating the revolver part, the content could be replaced, allowing the type of *Law-Breaking Art* to

be fired to be selected.

He locked it at the set position—

"*Law-Breaking Art* cannon, prepare to fire!"

Tracing the curse-ring engraved on the lower part of the barrel with his fingertip, he spoke the keyword that doubled as a procedural dictation.

The components of one tank were two military horses, one driver, a gunner, and a commander. Upon activation, their magical power reacted to the curse-marks inside the barrel and was stored—eventually, the curse-ring at the gunner's hand glowed faintly. That was the signal.

"Preparation to fire complete!"

The gunner's voice was joined by the commander's.

"Good! Fire!"

The gunner instinctively looked back over his shoulder.

"...Target!?"

"Right in the middle of them!"

If even one among the gunner or the driver had been a decent soldier, they would have stopped it. But...

"R-Roger!"

The gunner, who had decided on a military career after graduating from the Training School specifically because he "wanted to ride the latest tank," aimed the sights toward the group that looked like they wouldn't complain if they were blown away—the clashing black-winged monsters and the golden beastman—and actually fired.

Laphra-Lifra and Lugria stood up at almost the same time.

Rewarder and Diva—different races they may be, but having one's brain rattled still takes a toll.

Lugria had triggered a small-scale explosion *Law-Breaking Art* between them. Lugria, who initiated it, had the damage mitigated by leather armor. Laphra-Lifra must have taken it head-on, but whether she was exceptionally sturdy or just slow to feel it, she

didn't appear particularly affected.

The two rose, faced each other—and then, in the corner of their vision at the end of the road, they saw a swarm of Humes in uniforms and an unfamiliar iron box.

A pointed iron box. The cylinder attached to the front moved slightly.

At that moment.

A thin breath escaped Rezelde's throat.

Responding to a curse-incantation that sounded like a whistle, a band of light extended from the tip of his right hand like a whip.

"You use interesting techniques," Cezenol said.

What was in Rezelde's hand was not a whip of light created by *Law-Breaking Art*. It was a curse-band that had not yet been activated as a spell.

"I take it the *Law-Breaking Art* triggers the moment it touches something..."

Cutting his words short, Cezenol's expression soured.

"Reinforcements are coming, it seems," Rezelde said, catching the reflection of the patrol guards behind him in a shop's glass window.

"A tank... is that what they call it?" Cezenol muttered.

To his eyes, it looked like nothing more than an unrefined iron toy, but he had no intention of getting burned by underestimating it.

The cylinder on the front of the toy moved slightly.

At that moment.

Kirkerius's gaze wavered slightly.

Shin noticed it, moving only his eyes. He sensed the approach of the patrol guards and the military.

"—Tch—"

Kirkerius clicked his tongue.

A large number of patrol guards, and even a tank. The situation had changed. Judging that continuing the fight here was disadvantageous, Kirkerius looked at Shin.

"Just when things were getting good... some redundant interference had to show up. Our conclusion will be—"

At that moment.

An explosion occurred.

There was no sound of firing; only a blurred afterimage crossed everyone's field of vision. And then, the building near Laphra-Lifra and Lugria burst from the inside out.

From the entrance, from every single window, a crimson flame multiplied, pressing against the atmosphere to become a blast wave that scattered in all directions.

A sound too absurd to even call a roar struck the eardrums and bodies of everyone present. Even the patrol guards near the tank screamed, scrambling away instinctively to distance themselves from the machine.

Engulfing the fading flames, a massive cloud of explosion-smoke or dust spread out.

The street was covered in gray.

It was only now that the tank crew realized the extent of their own stupidity.

At first, Shin thought he had gone blind.

When he pushed himself up and opened his eyes, there was only a dim grayness. Feeling a slight pain in his eyes, he blinked and finally realized he couldn't see because of the kicked-up dust.

He had seen the power of a tank during a field trip at the Training School. The offensive power was certainly impressive. However...

"...Is there a moron alive who would fire that in the middle of a city!?"

He spat the words out, shaking his head.

And of all things, an explosive-type main shell. If they had switched settings, they should have been able to use cold or fire types. At least, that's what they were taught in class. What on earth were those tank crewmen thinking?

He couldn't hear a thing. Even his own muttered voice sounded distant. Had the explosion blown out his ears?

He must have hit something when the blast knocked him down. His body ached all over,

but fortunately, there didn't seem to be any major wounds.

Looking around, he saw something glowing faintly at his feet. Bending down, he saw it was one of the *Law-Breaking Art* swords he had dropped from the shock of the explosion. He picked it up with his aching body.

Searching further, he saw another light a short distance away. Shin walked toward it—and felt as though he had passed someone.

But when he turned around, there was nothing but gray smoke, though it was beginning to thin.

He recovered the second sword—and remembered Mei. She should have been right behind him. He started to call out but caught himself.

There must be Divas nearby. If he called out carelessly and Mei answered, it would reveal their location to them.

Come to think of it, were Rezelde and Laphra-Lifra safe?

In any case, there was no moving until the visibility improved.

"...Damn it...! This isn't funny, shit..."

He could do nothing but curse.

The first thing Laphra-Lifra noticed was the smell of blood.

Forcing herself up, she realized she was covered in wounds. Her whole body hurt. Not just here and there—every single inch of her was in pain.

The smell of blood was wafting from her, and no one else. It was only natural. In fact, it was closer to a miracle that she was alive without a fatal injury.

She knew that strange iron box had done something. Immediately after, the nearby building had exploded.

She felt as though she had jumped instinctively. Whether it was a reaction to the explosion or an instinctive sense of danger, she couldn't remember. Regardless—she was alive.

Her first thought was for Mei.

She couldn't see, but she caught the scent. She inhaled dust and let out a sneeze-like cough—but Laphra-Lifra's semi-beastified nose caught Mei's scent faintly mixed in the

wind disturbed by the explosion's aftermath.

Ignoring the heaviness of her body and the pain of her wounds, she moved toward it.

Perhaps because she was moving away from the epicenter, or because the dust was settling, the visibility grew slightly brighter.

And then—she saw something red at her feet.

"—Mei."

Her own voice calling out echoed in her head.

A red-haired girl lay collapsed, covered in dust. A quick look suggested she hadn't suffered any particular wounds, but she was unconscious.

Laphra-Lifra pulled Mei up onto her back and began to walk, intent on leaving the area for now.

"...What... absolute... idiots...!"

Driven by rage, Rezelde spat the words out.

His hearing was likely temporarily paralyzed by the explosion; he could hear nothing of his surroundings. He had been blown away by the blast.

Thanks to a Dragno's durability, he had no significant injuries, but he was certainly in pain all over. The curse-band he had manifested in his hand had also vanished.

It wasn't that he thought Humes were a particularly thoughtful race. But he hadn't imagined they were such fools as to fire a cannon in the middle of a city without distinguishing between friend and foe.

Of course, it didn't mean all Humes were idiots. Just as there were decent people and hopeless fools among the Dragno.

The problem was simply that a hopeless Hume idiot was riding in a tank. If left alone, they might do the same thing again. He needed to stop them before that happened.

Enduring the pain, Rezelde began moving toward where he thought the tank was.

—It is only natural for those who commit a folly to pay the price.

At least, that was Rezelde's way of thinking.

Cezenol knew he wasn't in a position to complain.

But really, this was a bit much. The sheer stupidity of those Humes in the tank.

Cezenol pulled himself up and spat out the dirt that had gotten into his mouth.

When the cylinder on the front of the tank had moved slightly and then stopped, he'd had a terrible premonition and had thrown himself to the ground with his wings folded.

If the tank had done nothing, he would have shown a fatal opening to the Dragno in front of him—but as it turned out, it had been a stroke of luck.

His ears were ringing from the roar and his body was somewhat sore, but for now, he had no serious injuries.

The problem was that tank. This was the middle of a Hume city. If an attack was coming, he'd predicted a freezing attack using cold air. And then, suddenly, an explosion.

The person operating that tank was either a cold-blooded warrior extremely faithful to their mission, or an utterly hopeless idiot.

But if it were the former, the shelling wouldn't have ended with one shot. It would have continued relentlessly until they were all reduced to mincemeat.

The answer, then—the latter had done something stupid and was now terrified, finally realizing what they had done. That was the only possibility.

If that thing was left alone, there was a high chance the idiot would have another outburst.

—Destroy it.—

It shouldn't be an impossible task. The offensive power was high, but from what he could see, it had many blind spots.

Dissolving the curse-bands coiling around his swords, he sheathed them both. Against a toy made of iron, such things were useless. He would crush it using *Law-Breaking Art*.

Cezenol began walking toward where he believed the tank to be.

Taking to the sky would make it easier to find the target—but it also meant it would be easier for the target to find him. There was no reason to become a target for an idiot with a projectile weapon. It was far more tactical to use this smoke.

He felt as though he passed someone along the way, but he ignored them for now. First,

the tank.

After walking for a while, a black shadow appeared in the depths of the smoke.

Dammit.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit.

Cursing under his breath, Lugria pressed through the smoke-filled street. He didn't speak the insults aloud—the one time he had tried, the vibration had rattled every wound in his body.

He was in pain. Everywhere. It was becoming unbearable.

While facing the Rewarder, he had glimpsed Hume reinforcements arriving in the corner of his vision. He knew the situation was far from ideal, so he had spread his wings, ready to retreat at any moment. But...

Who just fires? Normally? Without warning?

The projectile launched by the tank had whistled between Lugria and the Rewarder, crashed into the entrance of a nearby building, and detonated inside. Had it burst at their feet, Lugria wouldn't have had time to curse the pain; he would have been blown to atoms.

Not that he felt like thanking his lucky stars for surviving.

His body was a map of lacerations, but his wings were the worst. Because he'd had them spread, they had taken the full force of the blast wave, the shockwave, and the ensuing shrapnel. The wing membranes were shredded, the bones splintered. Flying was out of the question.

Those wingless Humes, who knew nothing but crawling on the earth, could never understand this agony. If he had to describe it—yes. It was like having the webbing between your fingers hacked at with a pair of dull, rusty scissors.

He wasn't so badly hurt that he couldn't fight, but he wasn't lightly injured enough to fight well. Either way, the wise move was to retreat and regroup.

Suppressing the pain, he forced himself forward—and realized there was a Hume standing right in front of him.

Was it the wounds that kept him from reacting instantly? Or was it because the man's

appearance looked like a punchline to a bad joke?

White dust had settled thick over the man's black hair; his face and clothes were smeared with soot. He was covered in scrapes and bruises of his own. It was the Hume man who had been facing Kirkerius—Shindred, or something like that.

"...We both look... like hell..."

Lugria's hearing was finally returning; his ears just barely caught the man's voice.

"...Are you Humes... idiots?" Lugria asked.

"...Huh?"

Lugria thought he had spoken quite loudly, but the man asked him to repeat it.

"I asked if Humes are idiots!" Lugria repeated, louder this time, with brutal honesty.

Shindred gave a wry, pained smile. "...Can't really argue with that right now," he said, giving a small shrug.

"So—" Lugria looked at him. "Do you want to fight?"

Kirkerius soared into the sky and landed atop a nearby building.

A 'tank,' was it? He'd never seen one before, but now that such things were being deployed, the correct move was to leave the battlefield. The other two would likely reach the same conclusion—assuming they were still alive.

He was sore all over, but he had no major injuries. It was lucky he had folded his wings in response to Shindred's provocation; it had saved his fragile wing membranes from damage.

He scanned the area from the rooftop. The area where the shelling hit was obscured by smoke. The massive cloud had spread all the way back to the tank. The patrol guards who had been surrounding it had retreated quite a distance. Perhaps they intended to leave things to the tank, or they simply didn't want to be caught in the smoke—or perhaps they thought the explosion was the work of a Diva and were fleeing in a panic.

Hiding himself to remain inconspicuous, he watched as the smoke slowly began to settle. It was then that Kirkerius's eyes caught a figure appearing in a back alley.

It was the Rewarder who had been fighting Lugria. And on her back—the target, the red-haired girl named Mei.

What now? Kirkerius asked himself.

Mei was limp on the Rewarder's back. Was she dead? Unconscious? Or just faint from injury? The Rewarder was still in her semi-beast form, her clothes and golden fur stained dark red in places. She was clearly wounded.

He felt he could kill them now. He was only lightly injured, whereas the target was out cold and the Rewarder was wounded and burdened with baggage she couldn't drop. If he took them down now, the mission would be over. Conversely, if he missed this chance, there was little hope of things turning in his favor later, given he had no guarantee his two comrades were even functional.

So be it. Kirkerius spread his wings and glided down.

Through the smoke, Rezelde pressed on. To fight a Diva only to be blown up by a Hume tank was a joke he didn't find funny. First, he would deal with that machine.

Truthfully, he wanted to blow it to smithereens, but he knew he couldn't go that far. The Dragno didn't have weapons like this. He recalled what he had read about tanks in the Training School library.

The basic philosophy was simple: use armor to block mid-to-long-range spells and arrows, and use powerful *Law-Breaking Art* to crush the enemy. That was it. This meant they were vulnerable to spells that altered the armor itself or to close-quarters combat.

As he moved, a massive shape loomed through the haze. The tank. He'd heard older models were pulled by military horses; this one seemed to be the same. Trained as they were, even the horses were clearly spooked by the explosion, as the chassis was rocking slightly. The patrol guards who had been near it were nowhere to be seen. He didn't know why, but it was convenient.

He had no intention of approaching from the front. He circled around to the right—the tank's left flank—weaving through the smoke while weaving a curse-incantation.

He released a gray sphere. It struck the base of the cannon, causing the steel to crumble into gray fragments.

In that instant, a flash of fire streaked through the air. It dove into the tank through the hole Rezelde had just opened.

Voomp!

The chassis jolted as flames erupted from within. The fire thoroughly scorched the

interior. Whoever was inside likely wouldn't survive. He felt sorry for the horses, but they would just have to curse their riders' stupidity.

Rezelde instinctively turned toward the source of the fire. There, beyond the thinning smoke, stood the Diva he had been fighting just moments ago, looking back at him with a startled expression.

It seemed that on the point of being utterly fed up with the tank's stupidity, Dragno and Diva were in total agreement.

"...Heh!"

Rezelde couldn't help a wry chuckle—and the Diva smirked back. Neither had expected the other to be so incensed by the shelling that they would both target the tank. In the end, they had destroyed it together.

But of course, destroying the tank didn't mean the end of everything. Rezelde turned back toward the Diva—but the Diva spread his wings and took flight.

"Don't get the wrong idea."

Ignoring the pain in his body as best he could, Shin raised his voice to the wounded female Diva. He was hurting all over, but she looked to be in even worse shape.

"Wrong idea?" she asked.

"Yeah. Forget 'Do you want to fight?' You're the ones who started this. Look... I don't exactly want to be in a death match with you guys either. But you're the ones coming for that idiot's life. That's where this all started. The real question is whether you're going to stop or not. If your answer is 'No, we're coming back to kill her as soon as we regroup,' then I'm not letting you walk away. I'll settle it right here. That's how it is."

It would be a lie to say Shin had no doubts or hesitations. He still had no idea who Mei really was. He still wondered why he had to be dragged into this.

But if the Divas kept hunting her, then letting them go now would only lead to more scenes like the mansion's basement—or the school, or Mark's house. He couldn't allow that.

Depending on her answer, he wouldn't hesitate. He wouldn't show mercy, even if it left a bitter taste in his mouth later. He had made up his mind.

At Shin's declaration, the woman Diva knit her brows slightly. "That idiot? ...Is she not your master?"

"M-M-Master!?" Shin's face contorted. "That memory-impaired, dim-witted freeloader? Don't mess with me."

"Memory-impaired? A freeloader? What do you mean?" The woman sounded genuinely confused.

"I should be asking you! You mean to tell me you guys—"

Are targeting her without even knowing the circumstances?

As he started to ask, Shin's expression stiffened. They were moving to eliminate Mei without knowing why. That meant the Divas were acting on orders—which, in turn, meant that even if he dealt with these three, nothing would truly end.

He realized it then.

An explosion sounded somewhere nearby. The woman Diva looked around, but Shin didn't react. With this smoke, they wouldn't see anything anyway. More importantly...

"I'll ask you again," Shin said. He already guessed the answer, but he had to know. "Do you still intend to take her life? Because if you do..."

"...I suppose so," the woman Diva said, her voice weary. "I was a fool to ask. There was only ever one answer."

Biting back the pain, Laphra-Lifra lunged off the ground. She felt it—bloodlust.

She leapt and spun around toward the source—upward. There stood Kirkerius. The five-horned Diva who had been fighting Shindred. He might have dropped his sword in the chaos, but he didn't seem to have any major wounds.

Laphra-Lifra bared her teeth. He was in the air. She was wounded and carrying Mei. She couldn't hope for normal mobility.

Broadly speaking, Rewarders didn't study *Law-Breaking Art*. They took pride in their own flesh. From birth, each possessed the ability to semi-beastify into a specific creature, and in that state, their physical prowess surpassed even that of a Diva.

However, only those who beastified into birds or similar creatures could fly. And of course, she couldn't use the spells she had never learned.

Ku-oh!

Kirkerius let out a roar. Laphra-Lifra knew that was the signal for a spell. A spear of fire scorched the earth where she had been standing just a moment before. She had

dodged it, but...

This was a back alley just one turn away from where they had been fighting. It was good that there were no pedestrians because of the commotion, but there wasn't enough room to keep running forever. If he rained spells down from above, she wouldn't be able to dodge indefinitely.

And then there were the wounds. She could try to ignore the pain, but that didn't make the injuries disappear. Every move she made drained her blood and her strength. And Laphra-Lifra could not fly, nor did she have a ranged weapon.

Then...

Laphra-Lifra ran to the back door of a nearby house and delivered a kick with everything she had. With a resounding crash, the thin wooden door shattered.

The sound of the tank firing echoed at the same time, but both Laphra-Lifra and Kirkerius ignored it. Kirkerius grew frantic. If she escaped into a building, things would get tedious. He dropped his altitude slightly to pursue—and realized his mistake too late.

Laphra-Lifra, who looked as if she were about to dive into the doorway, suddenly spun around. Something whistled through the air.

"!?"

Kirkerius's left wing jerked. He lost his balance in mid-air and frantically grabbed the edge of a nearby roof with his right hand.

Laphra-Lifra hadn't broken the door to hide inside. She wanted to create something she could hurl at her opponent. It was a childish idea, but thrown with the strength of a Rewarder, the broken doorknob had a velocity and destructive power that rivaled an arrow.

Laphra-Lifra put every ounce of strength into her legs. She kicked off the ground, then off a wall, leaping toward Kirkerius as he dangled from the roof by one hand!

The corner of Kirkerius's mouth curled into a small smirk.

Ru-oh!

He spat out an incantation and beat his wings. Confusion flashed in Laphra-Lifra's eyes.

The thrown doorknob hadn't actually damaged Kirkerius's wing. He had banked at the last second, avoiding the blow—and then used it to his advantage. He had feigned being hit, hanging by one hand to lure her in. Now that she had jumped, he would use

Law-Breaking Art...

No matter how high a Rewarder's athletic ability, without wings, she couldn't change her posture in mid-air without a foothold. Certain of his victory, Kirkerius prepared to trigger his spell.

At that moment, Kirkerius saw a small, white hand reach out gently from behind Laphra-Lifra's back. Mei, who had regained consciousness without him realizing it, whispered softly:

"—Negative—"

Kirkerius's spell failed to trigger. He couldn't even imagine that his spell had been neutralized by Mei. He waited for the moment that never came—the moment his fire would consume them—as his skull was crushed by the claws of Laphra-Lifra, who had kicked off the roof.

The moment Lugria roared, Shin jumped. The offensive spell she fired whipped through the space where he had been standing a second ago, merely disturbing the smoke.

Because of the haze, they couldn't see each other if they put even a little distance between them. But Lugria sneered. She couldn't see Shin, but her eyes caught a faint glow deep within the smoke.

It was the light from a *Law-Breaking Art* sword.

Does he think he's hidden? That assumption will be his death.

Lugria muttered an incantation and launched an attack.

Boom!

An explosion occurred. The light of the sword was sent flying. The smoke swirled—and Lugria clearly saw a shadow dash through the corner of her vision. The shadow left a small impact as it swept past the female Diva's back.

...I've really... lost my edge...

In her fading consciousness, Lugria mocked herself. There were *two* swords. She had completely forgotten such a basic fact.

Shin had left one as a decoy, hidden the light of the other, and used the sound of Lugria's incantation to pinpoint her location and circle around for the strike. It was a simple tactic.

Holding the shining blade, Shin turned on his heel. He didn't lower his guard. But Lugria, who had been struck clean across the back by a sword designed to destroy Diva blood, would never wake again.

From high in the sky, Cezenol's eyes caught the sight of Kirkerius having his head crushed by the Rewarder a short distance away.

"__"

He moved, keeping an eye on the Dragno's movements. A gust of wind blew, further thinning the dissipating smoke.

He saw the Hume standing on a street corner. In one hand, he held a glowing sword. His gaze was fixed on the ground in front of him. Cezenol couldn't see what was there, but he could imagine.

The mission was a failure. Even if he pushed himself now, he would likely only end up joining the ranks of the dead. Reaching that conclusion, Cezenol turned his wings away.

But—he was the type of man who paid his debts. One day. Without fail.

Shin looked up at the blue sky. There, he saw wings flying away. It seemed the battle was over. The female Diva wasn't moving anymore.

Shin let out a bitter sigh. The wind blew again, clearing the smoke.

—The street in front of my house, the wind direction changes between morning and afternoon—

He suddenly remembered Mark saying that. He bit his lip, just a little. He recovered the other sword he'd used as a decoy and clicked the two together, returning them to a simple metal cylinder.

Beyond the thinning smoke lay the scorched wreckage of the tank—likely the Diva's handiwork. And there was Rezelde, coming toward him.

"Are you safe!?"

"...Manageable..."

"And the other two...?"

"—Over here—"

It was Mei's voice. He looked around to see Mei and Laphra-Lifra walking out from a nearby alley.

Laphra-Lifra was returning to her original form. The contours of her face were slowly but surely becoming Hume, and with every step, the fur covering her body fell away. Her stride was fairly steady, but she was covered in wounds and looked even more haggard than she had before the transformation.

"Hey! Are you okay!?"

"Yeah. I'm fine," Mei said.

"Not you. Laphra-Lifra."

"Don't... worry. This much... happened often... back in the village."

What a hell of a village. Shin didn't say it out loud for fear of being yelled at. He said something else instead. "But you look like you've withered away."

"Rewarders... when we transform back... the fur that grew all falls out at once, and we lose weight accordingly."

"You lose weight?"

Dieting sounded easy for her. In any case, her tone was steady. As long as she wasn't pushing herself too hard, she should be fine.

"I took one down," Laphra-Lifra said, puffing out her chest proudly as she followed Mei toward Shin. "Though I had to borrow Mei's power."

"I took one down too," Shin said.

"Ugh! Kh...!"

At Shin's casual reply, Laphra-Lifra let out a groan of total defeat. She seemed to have developed some strange competitive streak toward him.

She stopped for a moment, then looked around—and Shin followed her gaze. Finding himself the center of attention, Rezelde went silent for a moment, then gave a small shrug.

"Before I could even take him down... he realized he was no match for me and fled," he declared boldly.

It was true that the Diva had fled because he knew he couldn't win. It was just that he was no match for 'Mei, the military, and the patrol guards,' rather than 'Rezelde'

specifically.

"Since he flew away, I couldn't exactly chase him with my wings in this state. More importantly—" Before anyone could point out he hadn't actually done much, he shifted his gaze to Laphra-Lifra and changed the subject. "I had heard that Rewarders in their beast form had high combat ability... but I didn't imagine it was that incredible. Of course, I suppose it depends on what animal you become. A golden wolf... was it?"

At Rezelde's praise, Laphra-Lifra's eyebrows shot up. "Not a wolf! A dog!"

"A dog?"

"A dog, huh."

Corrected, Rezelde and Shin both struggled to find a reaction. The smoke had almost completely vanished, and they could see the patrol guards starting to make a fuss in the distance.

"Well then—" Rezelde glanced toward them and made a suggestion. "Shall we make our exit before we get caught up in something complicated?"

"Yeah," Shin agreed.

The last time he'd been questioned after defeating a Diva, they hadn't listened to a word he said, and he'd ended up detained until he told a plausible lie. He had no desire to be dragged into something so pointless again. It wouldn't change anything anyway.

"Oh. But—" Mei said, as if remembering something. "You say 'exit'... to where?"

.....

Thinking back to the state of their respective homes, Shin and Rezelde both fell into a gloomy silence.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you."

It was two days after the incident when Rezelde gathered Shin, Mei, and Laphra-Lifra in a single room.

The city was still in chaos. Between the Divas and the opportunistic criminals, the patrol guards were swamped. The Training School was closed, and no one knew when it would reopen. The fact that one Diva was still at large was delaying the city's return to normalcy.

The official story seemed to be that two Divas were killed by tank fire, while the third destroyed the tank and fled. Regardless, they couldn't return to Shin's drafty house or

Rezelde's dormitory in this state, so the group had taken up residence in a hotel.

Rezelde was paying for everything. Not that anyone else had the funds for it.

Laphra-Lifra's wounds weren't as serious as she'd claimed. According to Rezelde, the transformation process likely boosted her metabolism and helped most of the wounds close up—either way, she was out of danger. After eating nutritious meals and resting in a soft bed, she was ready.

"This recent event has made it clear. The Diva attacks will not stop here," Rezelde declared to the group. "Their movements are organized. That means there is a high probability they will continue to target Mei-san. Which means... this will happen again. No, it might be even worse next time."

Silence fell. Shin, at least, agreed. The female Diva he'd killed had been acting on orders. He didn't think those orders would disappear just because a few assassins were dealt with.

"Therefore," Rezelde paused, turning his gaze to Mei. "Will you come with me? To the land of the Scaled Royalty—the Northern Continent."

"—!" Mei caught her breath.

Rezelde continued. "If things stay as they are, the same thing will keep happening in this city. But in our country, with our fellow Dragno, and with the proper preparation, even the Divas won't be able to touch you easily. When I told our elder—the Dragon Lord—about you before, he seemed quite interested and said he would like to meet you... so there's no problem with you coming along. I don't know if we'll find any clues to your memory, but the same can be said for staying here. I think it's a fair proposal—what do you say? Naturally, I will cover all travel expenses."

Mei opened her mouth as if troubled—but in the end, she couldn't say anything and looked at Shin.

Why are you looking at me? Why?

Shin looked away. "...Well... it's not a bad deal. It's certainly better than staying in this city."

.....

Mei turned to Laphra-Lifra. But...

"Laphra-Lifra will follow wherever Mei goes."

That was a useless opinion.

"Um," Mei said, turning back to Shin. "Will Subordinate Number Two... come too?"

"I'm not your subordinate." Shin took a small breath—and let it out. "I have no reason or obligation to go with you."

...*Hah...*

A deep sigh escaped Mei's lips. "I see."

Her shoulders slumped; she looked so very small. "That makes sense. Sorry, Shin."

Mei bit her lip slightly—and then she said it. "—I'll go..."

"The city is visible from here."

In the audience chamber of the Diva capital, Asorth, a Diva with pure white horns and hair stood up quietly from his throne. Upon hearing the report from Foreign Secretary Bourgiolas—the report of the failed assassination of the Hume—he walked to the observation window and gazed outside.

The room had been cleared. There were only the two of them.

"You should see it too, Secretary."

He spoke while keeping his back to the kneeling Bourgiolas. His semi-transparent white horns glittered in the light filtering through the window. He was draped in a pure white robe. This was the King of the Divas, Gilgazord.

Bourgiolas bowed and approached the King. The view from the window was the one Bourgiolas loved most, and hated most.

"What do you think of this view?" the King asked, his gaze still fixed outside.

"It is... a beautiful view," Bourgiolas replied.

"It is not." Bourgiolas pretended not to notice the emotion in Gilgazord's voice. "It is what lies beyond."

The place where the Diva castle once stood. Now, it was a massive crater.

"Fifty years ago. I saw the moment *that* fell."

"I remember it as well. ...Surely—!" A chill ran down Bourgiolas's spine. *Is it related? To that?*

"Everything has meaning. How we understand that meaning and how we act—that is the question. I do not intend to be as optimistic as Zorgamail, nor as reckless as

Gorgazild."

Naming the previous king and the one before him, the Diva King said, "I do not believe it is a mistake to eliminate a source of anxiety."

"...As you wish..." Bourgiolas groaned. "I have ordered the survivor of this mission to continue monitoring them. We will find our next move immediately—"

There was a moon in the sky. One of the five moons that circled the land of Croscadia. Was that—the Moon of Ren?

Lying on his bed, Shin thought about such trivial things. This wasn't the hotel. It was his own home.

Once the decision was made, Rezelde moved fast. He filed his own withdrawal from the Training School and his departure notice with the city office. The city likely didn't want to let an exchange student—whose presence was officially a national policy—leave just like that, but when Rezelde brought up the Diva attack and said he was returning for his own safety, no one could stop him.

It had been only three days since the discussion at the hotel and the departure. That meant—today.

The three of them had come by earlier.

*—Are you really not coming?—*Mei had asked.

*—Are you sure about this?—*Rezelde had also inquired.

*—I have no reason to go—*Shin's answer was the same.

She hadn't been there long, but Mei seemed to feel some sentiment, walking around the battered house alone. Shin had done some work on the place over the last few days—cleaned up, put some new sheets on the bed, fixed the door. If he could just do something about the roof, where the damage was worst, it would at least look decent. As long as it didn't rain, he could live here for a while.

*—Leave Mei to me—*Laphra-Lifra had said, looking rather smug.

*—I have four train tickets ready—*Rezelde had said as they left. Shin hadn't replied.

He had no reason to go. None at all.

Lying on the bed, watching the darkening sky through the hole in the roof, Shin whispered to himself, as if trying to convince himself.

This was the house where he was born, and this was the city where he was raised. Familiar streets. Old friends—

.....

The thought of Mark and Ridge crossed his mind, and he cut off his internal monologue. He changed his train of thought.

—Anyway, I won't have any trouble living—

.....

He thought about his dwindling funds and cut that off too.

Come to think of it, ever since Mei had barged in and the Divas had attacked, he felt the stares from the neighborhood ladies as he walked by were getting colder. Well, if you were targeted by Divas that much, people were bound to gossip. The more he thought about it, the more his anxiety about his future life seemed to grow...

He shook his head hard and reconsidered.

On the other hand, if he went with Mei and the others, what then? He'd be a constant target for Divas on the road. And even when they arrived, he'd be surrounded by Dragno. What then? He had no obligation to follow Mei that far. None whatsoever. No need to follow.

As far as Mei's safety went, she had Rezelde and Laphra-Lifra. What good would a Hume like him do? Once they arrived, they'd be surrounded by Dragno. Like Rezelde said, she'd be much safer than in this city. What meaning was there in him being there?

He suddenly remembered.

Will you come with me? The way Mei's voice had sounded so small and lonely when she asked.

The way she had looked down when he said he had no reason to go. The way she had looked at him when he'd grabbed her in his confusion.

His conscience pricked him a little. She'd been nothing but trouble. —Though it would be a lie to say it hadn't been fun at all.

He repeated it. In his mind. There was no reason to go—

.....

Shin sat up on the bed.

As the sun sets over the western mountains, the city is lit by artificial lights. The transcontinental railway station was located slightly off-center from Burgess City. The

gaslights flickered on the platform, and inside the train waiting for departure, the lights of *Law-Breaking Art* were lit.

The railway, which fortunately hadn't suffered much damage in the incident, had resumed operation immediately. The fare was by no means cheap, but there were still plenty of passengers. Many of the private compartments were full, and many people had come to the platform to see others off.

In one of those compartments, Mei had been staring out the window for a long time. In the indigo twilight sky, the moons of Croscadia hung.

"Do you think Shindred will come?" Laphra-Lifra, seated beside Mei, asked Rezelde.

"He won't," Rezelde said.

Mei's lips moved slightly in the reflection of the window. But no words came, and she closed her mouth tight again.

Rezelde continued. He knew that excessive hope only led to greater disappointment. "As he said himself—he has no reason to come with us. Besides—" He pulled a metal cylinder from behind his waist. A *Law-Breaking Art* sword. "He gave this back when we visited his house earlier. He said he was 'returning' it."

Mei pressed her forehead against the window glass. Hard—very hard.

The hand on the large clock on the platform moved. The station staff ushered the well-wishers away from the train.

.....

Mei's small whisper reached no one's ears. Outside the window, the station attendant checked the surroundings—and pulled a whistle from his pocket to signal the departure—and blew.

A long, long whistle.

"—He's here!"

Mei shouted and stood up. She began pounding on the window. Rezelde and Laphra-Lifra both looked.

Sprinting down the platform, weaving through the crowd and slipping past the attendant trying to warn him, was indeed—

"Over here, over here!"

Mei kept pounding on the window. They watched as he jumped onto the train. After a

short while, the compartment door flew open.

Standing there, breathing hard—

"You came~"

Mei turned around with a beaming smile. Her eyes were just a tiny bit red. Rezelde gave a small smile and held out the ticket and the sword.

"This is your ticket—Shindred."

Shin forced his breathing to steady—and opened his mouth. Toward Mei.

"...You... give me back my money, you bastard..."

Rezelde and Laphra-Lifra went wide-eyed. Ignoring them, Shin turned a fierce glare on Mei.

"...You came to my house earlier... I had a bad feeling, so I checked... My life savings were completely gone... You took them, didn't you!"

"The other day, I was flipping through a dictionary because I was bored—" Mei looked out the window with a distant gaze, as if reciting poetry. "I learned about the existence of a beautiful custom called a 'parting gift.'"

"Taking someone's money without permission isn't a parting gift, it's theft!"

"But look. You said you had no reason to go. So if I gave you a reason, you'd go— isn't that a valid linguistic interpretation?"

"I'm not going! I'm getting off! I'm going home! Give me my money back!"

Shin was quite desperate. He was even a little teary-eyed. But...

"We've already departed," Rezelde declared coldly.

It was true. While Shin had jumped on the train, found this compartment, and engaged in this idiotic conversation, the train had started moving. It was already moving too fast to jump off.

"I know that without you telling me!" Shin turned and snapped at him. "I'll get off at the next station and head back!"

"I see," Rezelde nodded deeply. "By the way, Shindred, I assume you're aware that this is an express train and won't stop until tomorrow morning, and that if you get off, I have no obligation to pay for your return fare, and that the fare is by no means cheap... right?"

Shin's movement stopped completely. It was a de facto declaration of defeat.

"And so~" Mei took Shin's hand and spoke cheerfully. "Treat me well from now on~ Subordinate Number Three~"

"Three!? I dropped in rank!? Wait, I don't remember ever becoming your subordinate!"

"Well, since you declared you weren't my subordinate, I removed you, and Laphra-Lifra was promoted to Number Two. And since you're relying on Rezelde, who's paying the fare for me, you're my subordinate. You've been reenlisted after Laphra-Lifra~"

As soon as she finished speaking, Laphra-Lifra broke into a sunny smile and said in a casual tone, "Good luck, Subordinate Three. We'll follow Mei together. If there's anything you don't understand, ask Laphra-Lifra." She clapped Shin on the shoulder familiarly, looking so happy she would have wagged her tail if she had one.

"Come to think of it—" Rezelde muttered, as if just remembering. "Dogs are animals that are quite obsessed with their rank within a pack..."

"...Hey... Rezelde..." Shin asked him with the face of a man wrongly convicted and facing execution the next day. "...Tell me... is this... some kind of bullying?"

"No. Not at all." Rezelde shook his head and smiled. A smile as cheerful as a demon's. "I think it's closer to kidnapping, actually."

The train traveled into the night.

In the end...

It wasn't until two weeks after the Diva attack that the Training School finally reopened. The school building had been given makeshift repairs, but some students were still nursing injuries, and others had moved away following the incident.

"...Man, the place feels kinda empty, doesn't it?"

Mark Forliber muttered as he scanned the morning classroom.

"It can't be helped. Not after an incident like that."

Ridgemonnd sat down at a nearby desk and gazed out the window.

"More to the point, how are you two even alive?" another classmate interjected.

Ridge had been impersonated by a Diva, and Mark's house had been leveled. Everyone who knew the details was certain they were dead. Yet, here they were, attending school as if nothing had happened.

Just then, one of the few female students opened the classroom door. The moment she saw the two of them, she let out a shriek, spun around, and bolted away at a full sprint.

"...That's just rude," Ridge grumbled.

"Hey, give her a break. It's a shock," a classmate said with a wry smile. "You'd be surprised too if someone you thought was dead suddenly popped up in front of you. Actually, Ridge... didn't you just see a Diva, faint from the shock, and survive that way?"

"What!? How did—! I mean, why would you think that!?"

"You almost said 'How did you know,' didn't you? So it *was* that kind of pattern."

"No! I mean...!"

"So, Mark, what about you?"

"...Who knows."

When the conversation turned to him, Mark gave a small shrug.

I'm going to be killed.

That was what he had prepared himself for when he faced the Divas disguised as patrol guards. But in the end, they let him go. His house was destroyed, but his family, who had been out at the time, was safe.

He didn't know why he had been spared. maybe the plan changed, maybe that was the plan all along, or maybe it was just a whim.

But Mark believed that "Ridney" had hesitated. It might be a convenient fantasy, but he didn't care. Mark Forliber had one extravagant wish: he didn't want to lose a single friend. He wanted everyone around him to be happy. At the very least, he wanted them to be spared from misfortune.

It was an impossible wish. He knew that. But he wished for it anyway, from the bottom of his heart.

Speaking of friends disappearing...

He had learned a few days ago that Shin and Rezelde had set off on a journey with Mei. There was likely some deep connection between that girl and the Divas. Shin had probably gone along to protect her. Shin had denied it fiercely, but Mark was sure it was a classic case of being a slave to love.

Whether or not it was true, that's what Mark chose to believe.

They were gone from this city now. But that was fine. Because Mark believed that one day, they would all return here safely.

Afterword:

Paranormal Consultation Room

Good evening, everyone. It is a weekend night, and once again, it is time for *Hajime Kanzaka's Afterword: Paranormal Consultation Room*.

"If science cannot prove or explain it, then it does not exist." I am well aware that many people feel this way. But is that truly the case?

Of course, we must not let our scientific curiosity and spirit of inquiry wither by dismissing everything as "mysterious" or "supernatural." However, is it not also an abandonment of inquiry to dismiss the mysterious as "impossible," "a lie," or "just your imagination"? We need not cite the episodes of Galileo or the discovery of the Coelacanth to know that history is full of things once deemed impossible that were later proven as fact.

Indeed, whether science can prove it today or not, the truth remains the truth. Tonight, I wish to shed light on and explain the events sent in by you—events that science cannot yet explain.

Our first consultation comes from H.K. in Osaka:

"Good evening. I look forward to your show every week. Please listen to my strange experience. It began with a single letter. As I read it casually, I was seized by a sense of utter shock. The content claimed that the names of the protagonists in my novel series, *Croscadia*—Shin and Mei—are exactly the same as the protagonist pair in a short story I wrote elsewhere called *O.P. Hunter*. When I rushed to check, it was true! How could such a mysterious coincidence occur?"

This is a phenomenon generally known as *synchronicity*. It describes multiple seemingly unrelated events showing a strange coincidence. For example, there are reported cases of twin sisters separated at birth who didn't know the other existed until late in life, yet had the same wedding dates, husbands with the same names, and children with the same names and birthdates.

The cause varies depending on the situation: theories of blood ties, localized energy, spiritual intervention, or even conspiracy. In this case, the consultant wrote the short

story while holed up in Tokyo and the novel at home, so the "localized energy" theory is out. It is likely due to fate or spiritual causes. Please do not worry—it is certainly *not* the result of the consultant's own negligence or a lack of creative depth in their repertoire.

Next, another consultation from H.K. in Osaka Prefecture:

"That night, I was up late playing a game. Just as my frontline Ninja landed a critical hit on a Lesser Demon, the phone suddenly rang. It was past 1:00 AM. Feeling a strange sense of dread, I picked up the receiver. From the other end came a weary, resentful woman's voice: '*Sensei... what's happening with the Croscadia manuscript...*'"

It's a ghost. It has to be. I immediately thought, 'If I tell her honestly that I'm playing a game, I'll be haunted,' so I blurted out, 'I'm working on it now! It's going perfectly, so please don't worry.'

The receiver went silent for a moment, then: '*For someone working on a manuscript, I can hear a Lesser Demon shrieking in the background...*'

I replied, 'What are you talking about? If you hear something, it must be a spirit at work!' I managed to slip away with that clever excuse, but similar calls have been coming ever since. I'm too scared to touch the manuscript, so I spend my days grinding for items. What should I do?"

Investigation has revealed that the editorial department this consultant deals with is located near the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. It is likely that the spiritual energy drifting through Yasukuni fused with the editor's obsession with obtaining the manuscript. When spirits fuse with the consciousness of the living, they can display incredible power.

However, if you extinguish one side's obsession, the spirit will find peace. In this case, the most realistic solution is to hand over the manuscript. Stop writing silly afterwords and finish the story as quickly as possible. That is the best way to lay the spirit to rest.

How was that, everyone? Such mysteries can happen anytime, to anyone, anywhere. Yes—perhaps even to you tomorrow.

Note: These consultations have been slightly dramatized for the purpose of this

afterword. Please do not take them seriously or get angry. Especially you, my editor.

Well then, this has been *Hajime Kanzaka's Afterword: Paranormal Consultation Room*.

See you again... next week.